POETIC LICENCE AND THE REFUGE OF TRUTH IN THE POLITICAL THRILLER

A Method of Examining the Role of Story in the Practice, Teaching and Study of Creative Writing

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Abstract

This inquiry, through the production of a political thriller/academic novel, and subsequent fictocritical interview with its central character, seeks to provide an illustration of the role of story in creative writing practice, and how it can be applied to both the teaching and study of the discipline. It explores how story, as a social and community resource, is a place where writer meets reader, where knowledge meets understanding, and where values, beliefs and axioms that inform human lives rise to the surface through a shared activity from which both writer and reader learn about themselves and others. I argue that when theories of story are engaged as knowledge in creative writing, as instruments in the production of an artefact, there is a transformative effect on character, writer, and reader. I further argue that story, and the theories that underpin its making, should not only be consciously incorporated in creative writing practice, but should also be a priority in its teaching and study.

Keywords: creative writing, creative writing studies, creative writing practice, story, transformative learning, transformative experience, transformative effect, emergence, teleology, English studies, thrillers.

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Contents

A note about the document

This document comprises an introductory Preface followed by the novel manuscript, *Poetic Licence* (PL); a fictocritical exegesis called The Art Lazaar Interviews; and three autoethnographic appendices discussing establishing the conditions that led to this research. It is recommended that the novel is read before the exegesis because the latter relies on the content of the novel for its context.

The document follows Modern Language Association (MLA) 8th edition style for the preface, exegesis and appendices, set in Times New Roman 12/24pt with quotations set off in double inverted commas (US style).

The novel is set within the document on pages 25-400. It follows Australian publishing style with dialogue set in single inverted commas. To offset its appearance, the novel, it is set in Janson 11/20pt, with a justified text, and features its own page numbers set below the page text. The main document page number appears as a running head at the top right of the page. References to content from the novel that are used in the exegesis are given with the novel's page number first, followed by the document page number in a square bracket. All spelling is Australian English.

Acknowledgements

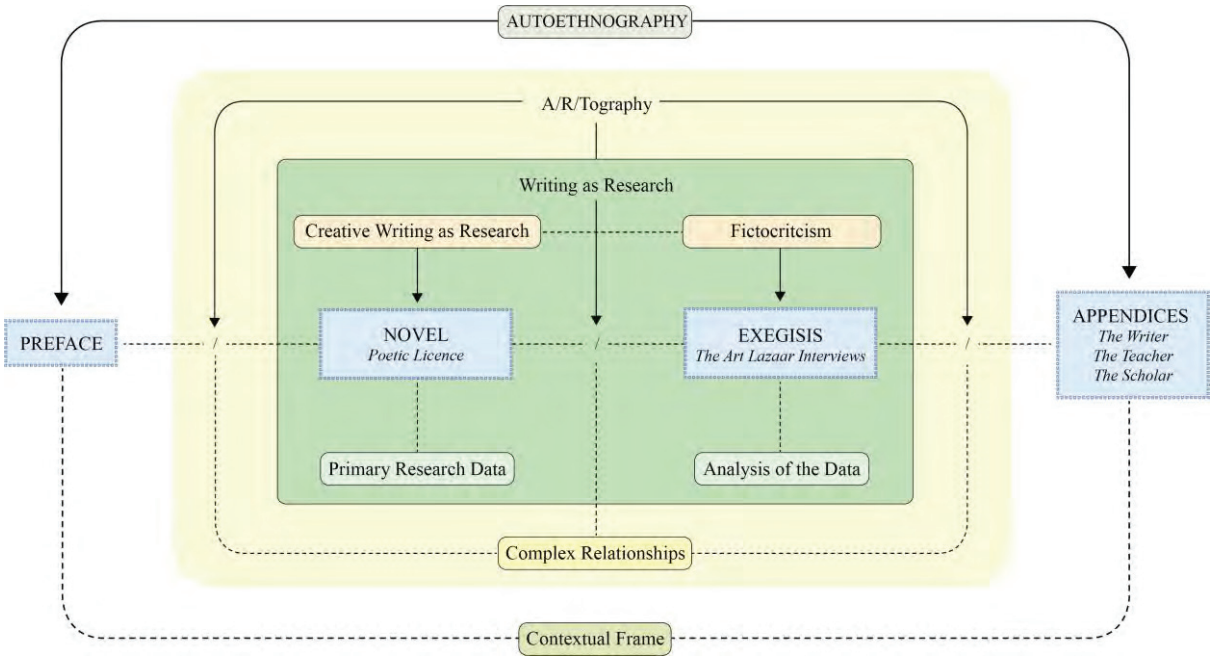
No work is ever created by just one mind; there are many contributors, some far distant, but others near enough to be counted. Dr David Moody, my principal supervisor, spent many hours in discussion with me on the finer points of the arguments made in this research inquiry, helping me discover new and alternative voices, entertaining my notions of story and its importance to creative writing. Prof. Peter Taylor, my secondary supervisor, offered critical views from outside of the traditions of English and Creative Arts and was both instrumental and influential in how I informed my views on transformative learning as a core argument to be made on behalf of education theory as it might apply to creative writing. Prof. Taylor's insights into social research paradigms was particularly helpful in formulating the approach to this exegesis as a theoretical discussion.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to readers of *Poetic Licence*, especially Jim Rossiter and Sasha Wasley in addition to Dr Moody and Prof. Taylor, but also my daughters Michael Lesley and Taylor Rose, all of whom offered valued and important feedback that helped me make a case for the political thriller as a device for contributing to the importance of the role of story for the creative writer.

A further thankyou is offered to the conveners of the Murdoch University English and Creative Arts Colloquiums (2013-19), the IPEd, ETAWA, and NAWE conferences between 2013 and 2019 who allowed me opportunities to exercise Art Lazaar's voice as a fictocritical commentary on The Role of Story and its Transformative Effects in Creative Writing.

Preface

About this Inquiry



This inquiry comprises, as primary research, the novel Poetic Licence, a political thriller, and an accompanying fictocritical exegesis as analysis. A preface, conclusion and set of appendices frame the inquiry with a historical and personal perspective. An A/R/Tographic lens enables an examination of the complex relationships between these.

While this inquiry, through the production of a novel and subsequent discussion with its central character, seeks to provide an illustration of how 'theories of story' apply to creative writing practice, my philosophy of teaching and learning in the field is deeply embedded within it. At its heart, the inquiry explores the understanding that story, as a social and community resource, is a place where writer meets reader, where knowledge meets understanding, and where values, beliefs and axioms that inform human lives rise to the surface through shared activity from which both writer and reader learn about themselves and others. I argue that story plays a central role in producing understanding from knowledge, and how that understanding has a transformative effect on character, writer, and reader, and consequently should not only be consciously incorporated in creative writing practice, but should also be a priority in its teaching and study.

As creative writing is the field of study for this inquiry, my view of it having three discrete modes – its practice, its teaching, and its study – is integral. The influence these three modes exert on my identity, and therefore on my research, is demonstrated in Appendices 1-3; "The Writer", "The Teacher", "The Scholar" (pp. 506-518). However, the symbiotic nature of these modes raises a significant challenge in dealing with any one of them without invoking values from the other two, a challenge which is amplified in the scope of this inquiry. It is common, in creative writing, for practitioners to be brought into the academy as teachers and then up-skill through study (Batty and Holbrook), demonstrating a loop in which practice informs teaching which informs study; and then study informing teaching which informs practice. For many PhD graduates, the study informs the practice, which informs teaching. It is imperative to take the nature of these relationships into account if the scope of the two thrusts of the inquiry's core subject matter – story in the field of creative writing – is to be tackled in any meaningful way. They are both very large subjects, which makes the inquiry deliberately 'big', a characteristic reflected through its sense of multiple 'meta' levels. If the inquiry focussed only on the practice of creative writing, for example, the concerns raised about the role of story and its transformative effects would be at risk of being ignored in the development of pedagogy, and restricted in developing its study within the field.

In this inquiry, I explore the view that creative writing cannot be effectively taught from a passive, reading-led, textual analysis perspective in which the teacher does not participate actively in the writing-learning activities. I have found through my experience of leading teachers in professional development in the field (2017-19) that a different mode of thinking about both creativity and writing than traditional teacher-led, curriculum framed, subject insistent approaches that are commonly held is required. While the research data of this inquiry draws on the actions in the making of a work, it does so with a careful eye to how

we can more effectively teach such actions, and thereby begins a discourse on this pedagogical shortfall by engaging with a character who teaches creative writing in the novel, *Poetic Licence*, and who espouses a number of 'theories of story' in that teaching. The character, Art Lazaar, advocates and argues for an approach which encourages a critically creative and creatively critical student consciousness (Melrose, "Reading and Righting" 110) that draws learners towards a fulfilling participation in public, community, and economic life. This approach seeks to locate student engagement between learning's capacity to absorb and synthesise knowledge, and its capacity to transform knowledge into something new and to extend the learning experience into other life roles and skills (Spiro 8), a hallmark of transformative learning.

Research Questions and My Primary Concerns

The primary question of this inquiry is: How can the transformative effects of story explored in the writing of a political thriller impact the teaching of creative writing? In answer, I set out to demonstrate how writing a political thriller engaged with story in its making, a journey requiring that I have a clear understanding of what story is, and what it does, and the theoretical devices that are employed to make it come about. I was concerned that undergraduate courses in creative writing rarely made reference to the role of story or the theories involved in their making in the teaching of the subject; all too often relying, instead, on a pedagogy of criticism and analysis that views story only in a receptive condition and not a creative one. A heavily dependent pedagogical focus on Literature as the source of theory tends to impose a rule-based approach, with academic responses being editorially focused on 'the written', and students encouraged to keep "to well-worn paths … making predictable choices" (Ralph L. Wahlstrom, *The Tao of Writing* 8). What we see as a result is the reproduction of forms and structures that already exist rather than exploration of values

associated with originating work and bringing it into being. A more extensive discussion on this is explored in Appendix 3, “The Scholar” (p. 514-18).

In the process of my investigation, other clarifying questions arose as a natural outgrowth of the literature that came under review, which helped turn the inquiry back towards its main point: Why story? And what do *I* mean by story? Subsequently, I set out to answer the following:

- How do we define and position story in the field? And why does it matter?
- What are the transformative effects of story?
- Why a political thriller as exemplar?
- What are theories of story? And in what ways are they different from theories of analysis and criticism that are prevalent in the teaching of creative writing?

Theories of story

As I grew to thinking more deeply about these questions, my analysis led me to an understanding that, by and large, all scholars in a given field want to improve the way their discipline is thought of by learners and educators, and that it is common for teachers to follow the teaching methods through which they, themselves, learned rather than take the risks required to embrace new ways of thinking about how their discipline can grow and develop (see, for example, Katharine Haake, "To Fill with Milk" 80). If story, its theories of making and transformative effects, were not part of the learning my teachers went through, why would they bother to research the field and include it in their pedagogy? After all, their job is to produce graduates whose accomplishments through learning are indistinguishable from those of other graduates from their own and other institutions. This conundrum led me

to consider the concepts of transformative learning that are typical of opsimath[1] experience and the extraordinary similarities between story and theories of transformative learning.

In writing the novel, I explored the way story, its theories and transformative effects shaped my creative writing, and the way my creative writing in practice shaped story. Specifically, I developed a theory that story produces a 'single unit of understanding' by holding a structural shape generated through the question of what a character does to get what they want, which Art Lazaar discusses as the DRAG model (pp. 479-80) and the way a story idea is developed from its spark to a structure that can be transformed (pp. 476-77). I also explore Thomas McCormack's position that the beginning point for a writer is the experience of an effect wanted which leads through a cycle of imagination and sensibility to production (pp. 444-47). During his interviews, Art Lazaar discusses, among other theories, those that are specific to the nature of the thriller ("The Thriller as Model" 467), as well as theories of character creation and development ("Characters, Authors and Readers" 403), modelling the story world (pp. 463, 469, 485) and exposing the natures of narrative, plot and story ("Story vis-à-vis Narrative and Plot" 435). In his teaching, Lazaar explores how story addresses the human condition (PL 16-20 [40-44]), and how theories of suspense (PL 85, 209 [109, 233]; ch. 9, ch. 18) and point of view (PL 241 [265]; ch. 21) help generate the emergent experience that story creates. In the writing itself, I experiment with the way story can unfold (see the three beginnings, PL 11-21 [35-45]), and how shifting and contrasting narrative points of view and tense generate an experience that heightens the impact of the four throughlines of the story mind (Phillips and Huntley, *Dramatica* 20).

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[1] Opsimath refers to a person who turns to study late in life.

Engaging theories of story as construction devices is how I enabled the story to be built from the ground up, bringing recognisable tropes and genre conventions to bear in interesting and original ways by: first, recognising the integral nature of change in every creative act, and secondly, setting aside merely subscribing to the reproduction of existing forms.

Creative Writing as a Research Methodology

Since 2010, *TEXT Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* has run a series of special editions which focus entirely on creative writing presented as research (Brien et al.; Brien; Brien and Baker; Brien and Baker). In the introduction of the most recent of these, the editors point out that writers in the academy are faced with challenges to "identify with greater precision what it is about their work which is genuinely an original contribution to knowledge across the field of creative writing" (Brien and Baker, "Creative Writing as Research IV" 1). Because the 'data' that informs this inquiry are sourced from my own performance as a writer, with a primary research question designed to take account of my past experiences as writer, teacher, and scholar, there is a sense that creative writing as a practice and as a research methodology are collapsed into a single seamless unit which is engaged as the writing (and the thinking behind it) takes place. As Sempert et. al. point out in "Methodologically Speaking", the methodology "does not have to remain fixed, front-loaded or hidden: it can be replicated on the page … for all to see (or hear) [or read]" (219), and thereby included as part of the experience of producing knowledge in the dual and symbiotic acts of creating and responding.

I am, however, also marshalling "writing as a method of research", identified by Laurel Richardson (417), a well-defined research methodology in arts-based and qualitative research literature. This is adjunctive to creative writing as research discussed above,

intended as a means to produce a more engaging and communicative text about the challenges associated with how we understand story and its place in creative writing as a practice and a discipline of study and teaching. In this way, it addresses what Julia Colyar discusses in "Becoming Writing, Becoming Writers", that the writing itself becomes the key learning device "which enables what researchers know about themselves and their topics" (421). It is the reiterative effect of *writing*, both in performing it (the verb), and its resultant 'written' artefact (the noun), that produces an understanding of what I am learning while I am learning about it. As Colyar points out, though, in terms of methodology, writing as inquiry is fraught with difficulties. And this is not in the least because of the dominant paradigm that places creative writing within English and Literary Theory as 'that which is written', a product or artefact, rather than, as this thesis argues, a 'performance in which thinking is made comprehensible'.

What becomes apparent, as an extension to Richardson's work and as Colyar discusses (442), is a need to invoke a different paradigm that embraces the question of "why we write" and challenges the traditional notions that writing is not done until the writer knows what they want to say. The experience of writing is a form of making thoughts comprehensible, which means that the writing act becomes part of learning what it is we want to say, how to say it, and to whom we might address it.

Autoethnography

A degree of autoethnographic research is employed to respond, in part, to the creative writing undertaken as research and is in evidence in how the central research is bookended by this preface, the conclusion, and the biographical appendices. The reason for this is to address my own concerns of the issue of why I perceived a gap in creative writing pedagogy, which was the product of having taught a program of creative writing for some years and subsequently discovering that the academy's views of the subject were considerably different

to those of my own. My deepest and earliest concerns lay in the possibility that my own experiences, prior to undertaking a course of study in the field, bore a weight that constituted subject bias possibly unfounded in others, and that an institutional approach would not carry the same level of seriousness, especially if it were collegial in nature. Being a creative writer means letting go of the seriousness at times, but also thinking in spaces not occupied by others. It is the need to reconcile these differences by filling what we might consider a *créneau*[2] in the understanding of the subject that drove the earlier stages of my research.

I found throughout this research that, in many ways, every time I write, I must be/become a self-directed learner, which quite naturally gives a degree of credence to the claim that creative writing is a subject that cannot be taught – a topic discussed and debated throughout the literature on creative writing since the emergence of academic discourse on the subject – but it can be practised and learned through that practice. The autoethnography provides the framing for the discussion about the research by me as researcher, and offers some boundary between my voice as author of this study and the voice of Art Lazaar who, as the central character of the novel, is engaged to speak for my findings in interview. This exploration could not be as effectively rendered if the aspects of autoethnography were not included.

Fictocriticism

Fictocriticism is a contentious product of postmodernism, adding weight to its claims in which the authenticity of a "grand theory" and single methodology of organising the

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[2] Créneau (Fr.) describes a niche or gap that is both fluid and capable of being filled, such as a parallel parking space, a crenel in a parapet, the expansion gap between buildings, and a gap in the market.

collection, dissemination, and presentation of knowledge are contested (Richardson, "The Collective Story" 199), and, as Helen Flavell points out, it is often without “clear rules of organisation, hierarchy, or set characteristics to aid identification” (3). Anna Gibbs says of fictocriticism that it is “writing which must furnish its own code either as model or anti-model” ("Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis" 1). To this end, it frequently involves negotiations between the creative and the critical, and, while drawing authenticity from a personal experience of the world, often reshapes it in fragmented and emergent expressions that reflect the way the work is formed during its making.

I chose to make use of fictocriticism because I have found it a useful way to stand aside from the text as its author and introduce a level of dispassion into the discourse as something of a counterweight to my perceived subject bias. To achieve this, I engage in a discourse with Art Lazaar, a fictional character (and an object of my making) who appears in *Poetic Licence,* a text of creative writing constructed through the course of this inquiry in which I make use of, and demonstrate active deployment of, theories of story. During the course of this inquiry, between 2013-19, I have employed the voice of Art Lazaar as a fictocritical commentator in conference papers in Australia and the UK.

A/R/Tography

The usefulness of a/r/tography as a methodology employed in this inquiry lies in exploring the complex relationships between my identities as writer, teacher and scholar (see Appendices 1-3), without which the creation of the novel and the arguments offered by Art Lazaar under interview could not exist. Stephanie Springgay et al. describe a/r/tography in the *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research,* as

> an inquiry process that lingers in the liminal spaces inside and outside – the between – of *a(artist) and r(researcher) and t(teacher)*. Vacillating between intimacy and

> distance, a/r/tography constructs research and knowledge as acts of *complication*. Rather than reassuring a reader/viewer with an easily shared idea or a commonly held belief, a/r/tography recognizes that meaning making can be disturbing, unexpected, and hesitant. ("A/R/Tographers and Living Inquiry" 2; emphasis in original)

This inquiry draws on techniques of complication specifically to explore the complex nature of the research question in terms of its 'bigness', that is, its invoking of the tridimensional scope of creative writing as practice, study, and pedagogy. Art Lazaar, by way of his teaching throughout the novel, demonstrates aspects of a pedagogy that I advocate in the teaching of creative writing, and have written and published elsewhere during the course of this inquiry (Price *Story Craft*). He offers the reader a glimpse of the liminal spaces Springgay describes because he too is teacher, scholar, and writer and must balance these roles with that of his poetic licence.

And while doing so may bear some criticism (because it can be said that I am one and the same), the novel demands that I address my identity as writer separately to that of teacher and scholar in order to provide an effective voice for the work so as not to prejudice my educational philosophy in which I view learners as those concerned with their changing and evolving circumstances as transformational experiences rather than with the mere acquisition of knowledge (Stephanie Springgay et al. 3). This effect, achieved through the 'fictocritical discourse' in which I hold a discussion between myself as researcher with myself as writer, enables a metanarrative to emerge between the novel as made artefact, the performance of its making, the subsequent interviews, and the autoethnographic discussions in this preface, the conclusion, and the appendices, so that they appear as though part of a whole (albeit with tonal and stylistic demarcations) constituting a unity of knowledge production through practice and practice development through research. The a/r/tographic approach allows the

tridimensional aspect of creative writing to be held in balance while the very big subject of story is raised as the central pursuit and purpose of the creative writer.

Creative Thesis

This inquiry is a hybrid of practice-based and practice-led research drawing on both models to establish conclusions about the role of story and its transformative experience within the making of a novel. In this regard, it might be better identified simply as 'practice research', whereby it makes use of creative expression in the form of a novel and, subsequently, a fictocritical discourse in order "to generate interactive and speculative texts that trigger questions about experience and self-knowledge" (de Freitas and Paton 489). The purpose for this is to illuminate the proposition that story is the pursuit of the creative writer; that is, for the creative writer to produce an experience in which a transformative effect is realised, I argue that a story is required, and furthermore, that theories of story are fundamental to that pursuit throughout the practice, study, and teaching of creative writing.

It is the nature of its hybridity that enables this inquiry to occupy a textual borderland in which both forms intermingle (Dawson, "A Place for the Space Between" 139) and produce a liminal experience that straddles the practice as performance of writing, and research as investigation of practice.

The Character of the Research Methodology

In a previous work I have argued that, in order to prove a point about a human condition one must engage a character and "that character can only prove the point as a consequence of the transformation that takes place" (*Story Craft* 39). The outcome is fundamentally tied to the actions and decisions a character makes, and those actions and decisions are tied to the four dimensions that generate a character's story presence (Phillips and Huntley 63). The methodology of the Art Lazaar Interviews that comprise the exegesis is

a metaphorical impression of such a character: it holds a presence within the inquiry in which its role is to examine the work of the academic novel, as if that is the point about the human condition to be made at the centre of the creative thesis.

I also draw on a theory of story from Mark Turner, where, in *The Literary Mind,* he argues that we think of stories in terms of actor, events and objects, (9). Characters have motivations to act; that is, the *someone* in the tale is impelled to take action towards some goal. The exegesis wants to explore the way story informs the making of the work about which it is concerned and why that should matter to the teaching and study of creative writing. Events consist of a methodology (a way of happening) and an evaluation (the consequences of those happenings). An exegesis, as an argument built on a theoretical position, surely cannot explore the way story functions unless it can overcome its own self-consciousness that emerges from having to justify the existence of an object of art in which it argues that art should not need explanation. In its adoption of the representational mode, it finds ways to examine story as the method which humanity uses to explore its own understanding of changes to the human condition and the device which is deployed to explain "revelation, or epiphany, or strong feelings of completion that we feel when we hear something, or see something that affirms our being" (Pearce, *Art in the Age of Emergence* 17). And finally, an object is a purpose towards which actions are propelled, or the emergent experience for which, the exegesis argues, the artefact solely exists because of the role played by story and its transformative effects.

In the exegesis, Art Lazaar, a character from the novel *Poetic Licence,* is discussing *Poetic Licence* and his author's actions that brought it into being. To achieve this effect, he is interviewed in the style of a celebrity author where the questions asked are in the somewhat sycophantic nature of those found by interviewers in *The Paris Review.* The interviewer is not identified, and the questions are designed not to challenge the interviewee's position on

the subject, but rather to explore his personal perspective of the character of the novel, the role of story and its transformative experience in its making, and a view of the author's actions and decisions in its making. This technique presents many of the questions as leading in nature, advocating for support of a given theoretical position rather than interrogative. The experience evoked entertains a certain tongue-in-cheek response to the very idea that a work of art should be examined for its theoretical being.

I argue in this inquiry, and have argued in previous work, that the work of the creative writer is never finished; that it is always being made ("In Search of the Creative" 60) and it is on that basis that I argue that this inquiry is a living organism. The inquiry reveals how it begins as an idea in the mind of the author and grows organically from there. By organically, I mean it develops legs (a metaphor of course) that enable the idea to go the distance and become a novel, which is then picked up (in some future event) by a reader, and the ideas embedded within are transferred to another mind, which we might call its reach (an action we usually associate with arms) and subsequently given greater air through study and contemplation and, thereby, breathes new life. A novel itself is often called (or becomes part of) a body, and if it is considered any good by its readers, or at least important readers, it will develop a foothold and capture the imaginations of many. Its ideas procreate.

In this imaginative space, this exegesis can be seen as an early objective view of *Poetic Licence*, examining the character of its becoming through the eyes of one of its own characters. Character, as is argued throughout this inquiry, is the centre of any novel, because without one there can be no novel: more to the point, there can be no story. And I also argue that without story there can be no novel. So, everything hinges on character, which means we need to be clear about how we understand this. Art Lazaar addresses this question when he discusses the differences between the making of character and the literary concept of characterisation (pp. 410-13).

Story

There is an imperative from the outset that the researcher writing a novel as research take a position within the cultural/social/political frame in relation to the subject matter, with a critical view of why the choice of that subject in the first place. The novel, as a foundation stone for literature, and its long association with culture, means readers draw substantial understandings – both of themselves and their own culture, and of others and alternative cultures – from the form. Although novels exist outside of fiction and fiction exists outside of novels, for me, it is the making of story (in particular fictional story) that has long held a fascination, leading to a view that nothing is quite as influential to human affairs as a well-told story – a position supported by R. L. Stevenson who argues that "works of fiction are the most influential books, and the truest in their influence" (loc. 465). The particular value of fiction, Mary Burchard Orvis writes, "is that it imposes a pattern or meaning upon life" (12), and it is through the patterns and meanings that we come to understand culture. Given that the teaching, study and practice of creative writing is, for all intents and purposes, I argue, instrumental in leading to new stories that affect cultures in transformative ways, creative writing is an ideal cultural space from which to investigate the role of story. Story too, as a communicated meaningful experience, and in its concomitant struggle to choose a form of expression commensurate to experience – and moreover the experience of 'the self' as commentator on that same experience – is central to a fictocritical mode as it engages in its narrative structures and elements to enact its transference of knowledge.

In both the novel and exegesis, I engage in a scholarly manner with narrative identity thesis (Bochner and Riggs 227) to explore the connection between the character as author and the author as character, and reflect on both as cultural figures. In particular, this draws from the way in which people tell stories about themselves either in mundane, everyday interactions – otherwise considered *small stories* – or in episodic retrospective stories

including epiphanic moments or recoveries from personal troubles (227). Exploiting Turner's recognition of "small stories as involving objects and events" and of recognising "certain objects in stories as actors" (9), I argue that we perceive story as an 'experience shared' involving actors (characters with motive), events (methodologies and evaluations enacted by characters), and objects (purpose in the role of characters). I say 'shared' because a story is told: the teller lays out a series of connected events as happenings in time (Truby, "The Teller and the Listener", para. 1), and it is heard, rendering experience as felt through the reimagining of those happenings by the listener. As a consequence of this telling-hearing experience, a truth specific to those events is reconciled in mind (see Pullman 365). Life is lived in fragments and the concept of small stories allows the idea of fragments to be compiled and juxtaposed in ways that express something more than the sum of its parts, producing an emergent effect we think of as an episode of revelation and are subsequently "transformed by our experience" of it (Pearce 18).

Transformation

A key theme that threads through this work is transformation; that is, the sensation that something in the culture has changed. This means that what is meant by culture in the context of the inquiry needs to be clarified, not least because, "despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature" (Asher and Simpson 98). We learn from Terry Eagleton that "culture" is the "second or third most complex word in the English language" (1) where possibly "a whole way of life" is the most commonly thought concept of what amounts to our understanding of it. However, if we take the view that the basis of our social identity emerges from the material conditions that enable culture to be "of our nature" (Eagleton 47), or emerge from the complexity of 'our doing', especially in the way we can make things that are of 'type' and then destabilise the type through the thing that is made, then those doings can be

grouped accordingly, and termed a culture. In this way, we can suggest that the cultural group I might be engaged with is creative writers, or novelists, or PhD researchers, or perhaps thriller writers. My sense is, however, that given the question is about how teaching can draw on what is learned from story's role in a specific act of creative writing practice, my cultural frame is best thought of as creative writing, which produces a hybridisation of the research as a "body of artistic work", which is to some extent a "spiritual and intellectual development" and coupled with "values, customs beliefs, and symbolic practices" (Eagleton 1) associated with the practice of creative writing.

The transformative effect is shown in this inquiry to operate in multiple domains in different ways. As a practising creative writer arguing for the theories behind that practice to be recognised in the practice, incorporated into teaching, and researched at greater depths in study, an authorial transformative experience arises out of the writing act. This is informed by the study of creative writing theory that goes to informing the practice, and the teaching of creative writing through pedagogical practice explored within the novel. In a second domain, the central character of the novel undergoes a transformation as an effect felt through the dramatic consequences of the novel which affect not only his character, but the level at which he is engaged with the institutions that constrain his life. A third transformative effect is felt by the reader who experiences an alternative way of looking at events that have shaped and affected their lives, as patterns imposed upon them by the circumstances of the novel. Quite often these patterns are mere coincidence, they may not mean anything in and of themselves, but they can reveal themselves, especially in conspiracy thrillers, as "probable coincidences that weave our lives together like stories" (Alexander 154). It is the emergence of probable coincidence between the events of stories and the effects of verisimilitude a reader experiences that gives rise to the stochastic resonance that helps story structure become

apparent to readers as if what is revealed can be predicted, and thereby confirming the transformative experience that story produces.

Hybridisation

Hybridisation emerges as another common theme throughout this research in both the creative piece and the exegesis, and in their blending, and it is especially prevalent in fictocriticism's desire to fill the *créneau* between the critical and the creative. But the interstice explored by fictocritisim in this research refuses the either/or dichotomy we often find interrogated by postmodernism, choosing to adopt a model that sees oppositions in a continuum of reciprocal movement from one towards the other and the interstice as what Shang calls an 'interality', an enabler of change ("Interality Shows Through"). This approach embraces Melrose's view of "the critically creative and the creatively critical experience … that feeds the creative writer's reading and writing diet" (*Write for Children* 9). A hybrid model, as such, emphasises creative practice as practice research, and engages with reflection on perceptions, theory, and abstractions in documenting the experience through the language of creative writing practice in deference to more academic styles.

In the novel, there are sections in which the central character, Art Lazaar, draws on theory to explore ways his students can approach their work, and in the exegesis, Lazaar argues and explains his position relative to the academy, the author and the story. This provides a methodology of fiction (and even metafiction) in which references and debates are embedded within the context of a fictional teacher presenting theory within the irony of a metafictional framing (Williams, "Creative Praxis as a Form of Academic Discourse" 259). Through narrative identity thesis, I investigate further exploration of creative writing by embedding the techniques of the novelist into the exploration of a theoretical foundation and use the creative language of fiction to give the research "a quality that conventional discourse often lacks" (259).

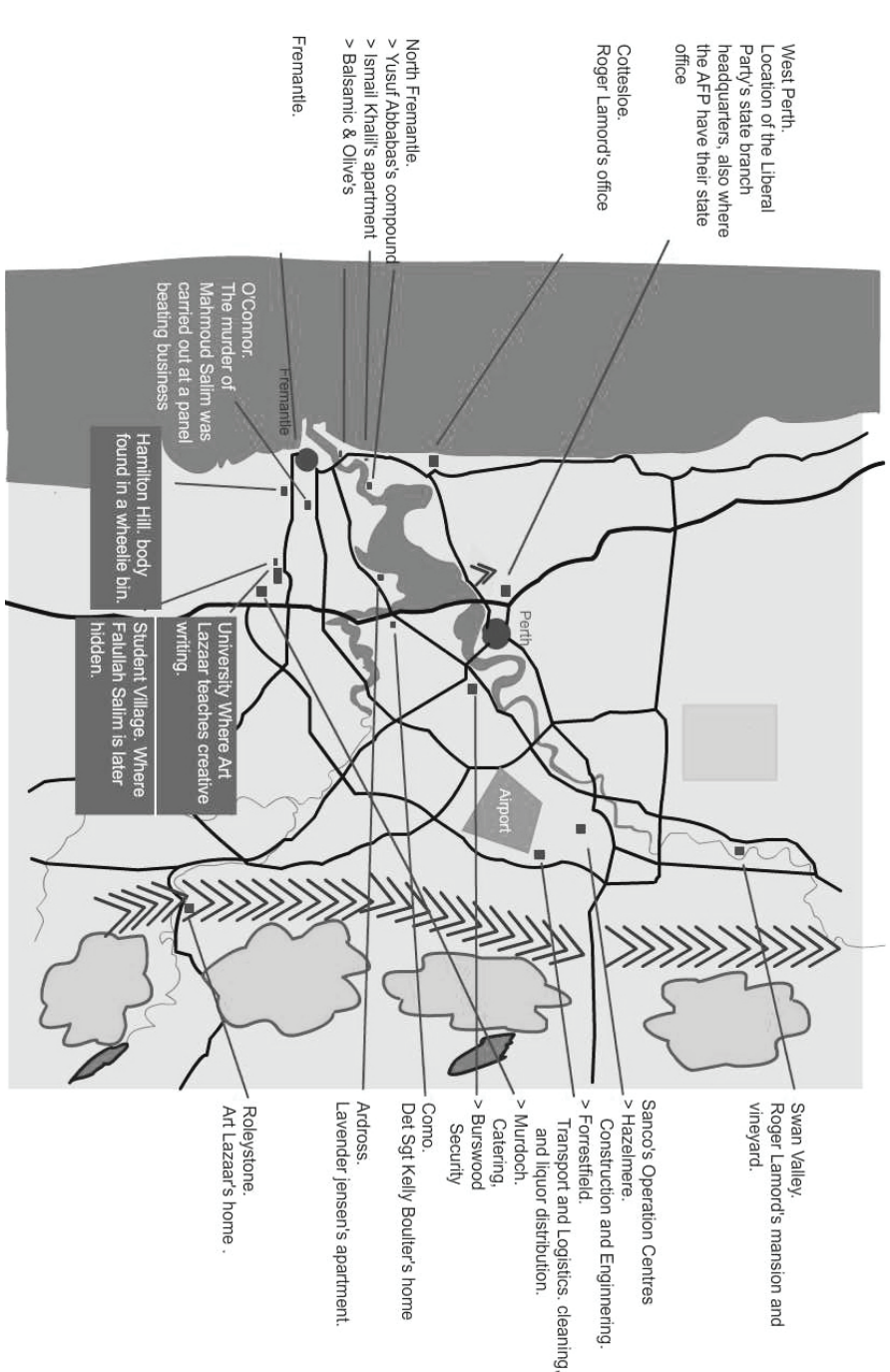
POETIC LICENCE

A Political Thriller Manuscript

by Kevin Price

The truth alone does not lead to freedom.

General setting




Fremantle
Lamord's Office
Yusuf Abbabas's compound
Ismail Khalil's apartment
Railway Hotel
Balsamic & Olive's
Soup kitchen
Fremantle Detectives
Hunter's hideaway
Panel Beating shop where Mahmoud Salim was murdered
Mahmoud Salim's body found dumped in wheelie bin
Lavender Jensen's apartment
Det. Sgt. Boulter's apartment
Boulter's 10 km run around the bridges
University where Art Lazaar works
Student village where Falullah Salim is hidden

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POETIC LICENCE

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The window is dirty, all grime and grease, work lights blaze in the paint booth, the doors are closed so none spills outside. A man of African appearance peering in can make out two men dressed in dark uniforms, big men, and another, smaller, hanging by his feet from a chain-winch, hands trussed behind him, fixed to his waist, his mouth gaffer-taped and his head strapped back. He is wriggling around on the chain as they lower him until his head is just below the top of a wheelie bin lined with blue plastic. The short glimpse he gets of the head suggests he is young, of Middle Eastern extraction. The next thing, one of the uniformed men steps round behind the guy and takes a military-looking knife, a big blade, and in one professional movement, cuts the guy's throat like the halal slaughtering of a goat. He holds the head back as blood spurts out and the other guy lowers the winch a bit, probably to limit spillage, and the guy on the chains bucks and wriggles and shit and piss stain his trousers until the life bleeds out of him. Once the blood has drained, they winch him back up a bit and the other uniformed guy gets a camera and takes photos of their handiwork. The observer chokes on rising bile, stumbles off the drum that gave him access to the window, and flees into the night.

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1

Monday August 5 — 33 days before the election

Stories are strange moments.

One beginning could be the summons in the phone call from my new boss, Donna Gardner. I've barely dried from my morning shower when the faint buzz draws my attention and the phone's screen lights with Gardner's name next to the digits, seven-oh-five. My brow wrinkles at the why of it. Professor Donna Gardner runs her school differently from the last bloke, I get that, but early morning out-of-hours calls don't seem her style. Donna Gardner expects that people be prompt, direct, provide effective supporting arguments for any demands on the school's resources, refrain from involving alcohol in decision making, fully support alternative positions, court consensus on how others might feel about the circumstances being considered; but a solitary voice?… uh-uh, not a chance. Man, so different working for a woman.

It's not with women in authority especially that I have a problem, it's that when I see a beautiful woman — and Gardner is that — I have a private urge to map the topography, a kind of poetry in depravity which, if it happens to coincide with authority, ratchets up the fantasy a notch or two and points me along a path called trouble. To ignore it is a denial of my poetic instincts, and yet that is what seems to be expected of today's institutional man. Nevertheless, with regular prodding from my therapist, I am quite at ease with the fact nowadays that it will never escape my mind. It is, after all, a troubled mind. And an early morning phone call, at home, from Donna Gardner is both new and unusual.

'Morning,' I say, searching a grey and heavy sky beyond my window for inspirations of levity. I say no more and wait with the phone on speaker so I can dress as we speak.

'Art, it's Donna.' There's a particular musicality to her voice that I enjoy.

I savour the warmth like the swell of cello in a Hans Zimmer score.

'If you're calling for breakfast, you're too late.'

She gives a short, polite, chuckle. 'No Art, and I do apologise for my early intrusion, not a habit I like to cultivate' — and then the warmth evaporates — 'can't be avoided, I'm afraid.'

Can't be avoided. It's a phrase that either implicates power beyond a pay grade, or a lie to make it seem so. Which? 'Sounds like a bit of a worry, Donna. what bad news do you have that can't be avoided, you're afraid?'

'Did I say it was bad news, Art? I'm sure I didn't. No, it's just a scheduling alteration, but it does affect your day today. It's the calling so early that couldn't be avoided.'

'I have a class nine till twelve and a couple of supervisory meetings later in the day.'

'You may have to cancel those.'

'I can't cancel the class.'

'Not the class, the meetings.' A pinch of treble is added here to enhance clarity.

'I'm not going to like this, am I?'

'I can't speak to your likes and dislikes, Art. The curriculum committee is meeting today, and you're required to attend' — and here it sounds like she is reading — 'at one-thirty to inform the committee on the future value of your particular discipline to the school. Your presentation and discussion is expected to last for thirty minutes, you are then required to be available for further questions and possibly to take instructions for further research.'

She waits. So do I. At least long enough to take a deep breath and counsel

myself against any rash outburst that might prove prejudicial. Collecting myself, I tuck in my shirt and scoop the phone from my dressing table, turn it off from speaker and press it to my ear.

'This was scheduled for mid-September,' I say, 'I'm hardly prepared for this, Donna.'

'Out of my hands, I'm afraid, Art. I'm told even the VC is attending this one. He insists that Creative Writing be heard today.'

I'll bet he does. The subject assassin present and accounted for — *Sir!* Odd how the Vice Chancellor is spoken of as though bearing a chest of medals and beyond the need of a name, mere title a full and adequate moniker. Ours is a euphemistic world, but me, I prefer a spade to be a spade. Truth matters; clarity matters more. Wallace Lipschitz, Wally to those closest to him I have no doubt, but Lippers to most of us who prefer the sentiment held in the last syllable of his name.

'Why on earth would Lipschitz, of all people, feel the need to be in that meeting? Curriculum is the province of the Provost.'

'And the Provost is the province of the VC. He can be where he bloody well likes. These are difficult times and big budget issues are at stake. Just do your best.'

She disconnects on my 'Okay', I pour a coffee into a travel mug and dash through a sudden cloudburst to my car, thinking about a little gem on improvisation from Alan Arkin.

Stories are strange experiences.

Another beginning might be how I came to teach a subject that has all

the standing of a wilted lettuce leaf at a university in the first place. It remains as much a mystery to me as the circumstances of my conception, an event my mother claimed, and insisted on reminding me annually for the last twenty-five years of her life, was entirely accidental. It couldn't reasonably be argued that the appointment was pre-ordained, but its linkage to that long-ago event has a strange affinity. My mother was a teacher and musician — which she loved better it was hard to say, but she had powerful connections that led all the way to the namesake on this university's letterhead, connections that placed her at a party where, in a moment of post-performance rapture, she met my father who was prowling with intent. Of that encounter, I was the product. Of him, I remember little. They married. He went on to be a school headmaster, a drunk, a philanderer, and dead shortly after forty. She remained stoical in her resolve to temper the accidental curve that became me.

Accidents are the thread that bind my life, one of the biggest worires.

They are found stitched into every turn, from an early education at a well-respected institution to holding a poetic licence of nebulous origin, every weave gazed upon in hindsight as something that happened upon me and not the other way round. Chance became my personal telos. My mother claimed to have named me as a result of a conversation she overheard promising that art would change the world, and she decided that I would be that change. I would be the movement out of nothing, from dark to light, yielding to firm. A heady postpartum dream that, at least thus far, proved to be unfounded because, thereafter, I consistently failed to measure up to those expectations. I failed in my school years. I failed in my early career choices. I failed in my marriages. She'd had designs on me being of stately material, a steadfast political force with

which the world would have to contend. I chose journalism, but fell further from grace into music, and then, as love, for poetry. Chance sent women my way, three of them once wives were now divorcees. Chance has me landing on my feet more often than my arse, but I suspect, from time to time, that could change at any moment. Chances are, now might be one of those.

I do not teach creative writing from a career forged in academia as do many of my colleagues, but of lived experience, drawing upon a working life as a writer, a creator of unrecognised, un-acclaimed works, a hack, and a performing poet who subscribes to the notion that the capacity to represent, design, and make meaning are the only worthwhile pursuits of a human life fully lived. In efforts to tip economic fortunes my way, I'd spend the occasional afternoon conducting group sessions for would-be novelists and poets, contesting post-modern nonsense and insisting that anyone choosing to write is indeed fully responsible for their actions as creators of worlds and builders of bridges to meaning. In my endeavours to unpack the vagaries of the human condition, I would pour cold water on the audacity of pompous scholars who declare the author is either dead, or has disappeared behind the work in some conspiracy against point of view. It is the writing that matters, I argue: 'What you have to say and how you cast about to understand how best to say it.'

One day, I was overheard on this platform by an elderly, bespectacled, eternally haunted, fellow poet who happened to head the school in comparative literature, poetry and dramatic arts at this university. He sat through my discussion, listening, taking the occasional note, brow furrowing and de-furrowing to some hidden neurotic rhythm as he regarded me with bright, olive eyes. At the end, he took me aside with a suggestion that we walk down by the lake,

whereupon we sat on a bench gazing over the water at a pair of ducks as they negotiated the islands of reeds for a nesting place hidden from the predatory ravages of their world, and he strongly advised that I should take up residence in creative writing because, he said, we think you might complement our faculty rather well. Before I'd an opportunity to question his use of 'we', he went on the sell.

'We have a few common connections from around the traps, you and I,' he said, his voice distant and reminiscent, 'and, to be truthful, you come recommended: your name has been in our books for some time. The salary's certainly better than what you're making now, plenty of leave, and excellent superannuation.' He smiled at that, and gestured as though referring to a different version of the time. 'People who are outsiders frequently fall afoul of the constraints of the institution that is modern academia, and there are dissenters aplenty who will likely gall at the thought of having the likes of you aboard. But you might fit well if we think about it: chance is on your side, and chance and constraints together are a powerful, purposeful combination to which I think your poetic licence lends itself admirably — yes we know about that — the academy has no shortage of hidden agendas and mysteriously lost theoretical devices begging pursuit, not the least of them the razor gang and its reign of subject assassination.'

Stories are strange things.

And yet another beginning could be when I'm discussing Aristotle with my contemporary novel writing class later in the morning.

'Aristotle said' — I'm lecturing — 'that a "beginning is that which does

not itself follow any causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be". But the teleology of human life makes plain that everything is connected, so it then comes down to the writer to determine what it is that has no causal necessity but a significant bearing on what comes to pass. The Dean called me at seven o'clock this morning, she had never done that before, so does that make it a beginning? Commonly, we think of a beginning as a moment of significant change in a character's life, and that significant change is what causes subsequent events that could be argued to have no connection to events prior to that significant moment. And, although Aristotle is talking about plot and tragedy, his discussion on beginning middle and end is probably our earliest theory of story from a creative point of view. It helps us come to realise that stories are not … *Things*.'

A couple of dozen eyes regard me with a *what the fuck?* expression. As denial is the tipping point of interrogation, artifice is the gateway of critical thinking. I wait and watch, and then continue.

'Let's take it as a given that all stories are sparked by some moment of observation. Might be internal or external, but either way it is a gift which then must be unwrapped to reveal what is in fact observed. We perceive that moment as a consequence to our sensibility, an *effect wanted* if you like, but it is not physically there, so it's hardly a *thing*. When you make an observation and your gut churns a little and you think, "now *that* would be a great story", you need to seriously think about what you've actually seen, because whatever is physically there to be observed is a potential not an actual, you bring to it something of your own that is not in its physicality. It's not just the seeing, but the ways of seeing and a strange twist in which the *now* meets with the *possible*, as

though you, as writer, stand in the future as observer observing the observation you have just made in the present. Time collapses into the gap between, which means your task is to reassemble time so the emotional impact of that moment is transferred to others. This reassembling of time, by the way, is what we commonly refer to as narrative.'

It's a small class, a group of third-year students and a Master's contender, with a significant female bias, generous dollops of spontaneous enthusiasm, and an age range from about twenty-one to forty-something. Committed students who harbour dreams of prospects that put their learning to productive work. But they have no idea that, in the about to-be-lived-in future, prospects for those following in their footsteps might be shot to pieces. Our present focus on the thriller seems apt. The subject assassin comes.

I shake my mind back to the present.

'If story's not a thing, why are we talking about it?' Laura Johnson, the group's habitual first responder, cherubic, bright, occasionally gushing, with a preference to be free of makeup, flashes a grin, looks around the group, and then at me expectantly. The group lulls into silence.

'Story is *us*; *we* are story. Story is all that we are. That's what the writer makes, so it's probably important to know what that might be.' My response is animated, channelling Thomas King and Andrew Melrose, their words mine to do with what I like. I urge them. 'Take a moment to think about it, and discuss what happens when you become aware of story.'

I wait, and while they murmur and debate and laugh and chide with each other, I drift back to the case of the subject assassin and begin to see conspiracy in the making. When I eventually call the group back to order, I ask for consensus.

The oldest member — and the only one taking the class as part of his Masters degree — Ricard Koffi, an erudite forty-something scholar from Abidjan, in the Côte d'Ivoir is nominated as spokesman. He is tall, athletic, with an even smile, a low and melodious voice, and intelligent curiosity evident in bright, enquiring eyes.

He starts slowly but gains confidence as he warms to his subject. 'So, there are two voices involved, right? The voice telling a story, yeah?… And the one *hearing* it — a teller and a hearer. The teller composes events that illuminate a character's desires, the struggles they go through, the circumstances of place and time, what they do to get what they want, right? But if two different people hear the same telling, they might have different story experiences because they bring their own experiences to that hearing; they mediate those events in different ways. Their meaning will vary, but we want to say it is the same story.… It's hard to explain.'

'Well, that vcould be a worry. What makes it so hard to explain?'

The room bursts to life as voices jump in from all directions.

— It would be easy if it was a thing you could carry around like a suitcase, but like you say it's not, so how do you explain something that's not a thing?

— Yeah, it's only a *some*- right? I mean, it's like an experience that infects the mind … aspects of human nature that you can't easily explain or understand.

— It's like, even though the teller is laying out the happenings, the story forms around that, like, in the mind of the hearer.

— So, you're in the movies … watching these actions and hearing the dialogue and the sounds and music, but you're actually piecing it together in your head.

— It's like a whole separate story-mind bringing pieces from different dimensions together and then, *bam!* you all of a sudden realise what the character has been struggling for and you get it.

I'm energised, animated, waving my arms in poor imitation of an aircraft marshall bringing an Airbus to port. 'Story is *story* because it has affected you,' I say, 'it has shown you a way in which conditions that make us human change, however slight, and by that illumination it has changed you too, in the *aha!* Moment,' I point, 'you said it, *bam!*' — *a* pause for dramatic effect as my right fist slams into my left palm — 'The transformative effect is two-fold: the character and or their circumstances, and you, transformed. And only story can do that, that is its *strangeness*.'

And that's when the strangeness hits me like that Airbus touching down in a category four crosswind. I'm not just talking about my students and their experience of story, I am sensing the unfolding of high drama in my own mind. Coming face-to-face with the all-powerful sitting in judgement of my job and the entire future of student enrichment. But it's not from four hours in the future I am observing this moment, it is from some other distant time. A teacher fighting for the future of his class stumbling upon corruption that those involved will go to any lengths to keep secure. It's all in how they propose to get away with it.

Stories are strange.

There is one more possible beginning, one that under normal circumstances might be presented as a preface, something to whet the appetite before the beginning proper. But normal circumstances are far flung. We follow our discussion about the observer, the observation and the observed in the

contemporary novel writing class with students exploring observations of their own that lead them toward writing a thriller.

Many are interesting, but it is Ricard Koffi's that is bone chilling. This is how he told it.

So, I know this guy, right? — stacks supermarket shelves, cleans the store, y'know?… He walks home past the factories to where he lives using the back lanes. This is normal, yeah? Six nights every week. So he's walking along the back of some buildings one night and he sees lights on in a factory, which is unusual, because, in all the times he's walked this way, he's never seen the lights on in this place. And as he walks along the back he hears a machine inside, chains rattling, yeah?… And this faint muffled cry. So he stops and climbs up on an old oil drum so he can see through a window. He can just make out two guys dressed in dark uniforms, big guys, and another guy hanging by his feet from a chain, all tied up. He watches one of them take a knife and cut the victim's throat. Then there's a sudden flash. It scares him and he scrambles down and runs. He knows about shit like this, because where he grew up, ritual killings are used to send messages, and people only do that shit for money or if they've been ordered to do it by someone higher up.

Whatever beginning you choose, I hope that, in the end, you will reconcile the changes it portends with those that occur, both to you and to me, for that is the nature of the writing act, even though you may not see it coming.

I know for certain that I did not.

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2

Tuesday August 6 — 32 days before the election

My performance before the Curriculum Committee the day before can't be considered by any standards remarkable, but a good piece of improvised theatre, working with the materials at hand: my memory, my experience, and my observations of the faces and expressions before me. All I arrive with is the sense of an effect wanted, what Thomas McCormack calls a *prelibation*, a word he uses to indicate a longing or craving or appetite the specific satisfier of which is not yet named. Of my pitch, I remember very little, making it up as I go along, but that is the writer's craft in trade, is it not? We sense the prelibation, dip into our glad-bag of imaginative tools and accessories, try a few out, watch for the failures, let our sensibilities decide whether we've struck gold or need to re-salivate on the desired effect and go again. Hopefully, as Samuel Beckett might have it, each successive failure being a little better than its predecessor.

I am astonished to be so quickly summoned to a follow-up meeting with two members of the affair: the Dean of Studies, who is the deputy provost overseeing education and Chair of the Curriculum Committee, and, my own boss, Donna Gardner. They are there ahead of me. Elise Jarman, hand-picked a year ago by Lipschitz in a shady selection fielding just the one candidate, is a woman of few utterances but decisions of concrete when it comes to what gets taught and how. Social Sciences is her academic field.

'This is a modern university, Lazaar,' she says, 'we teach architecture to produce architects. Teaching engineering produces engineers. But creative writing …? If that is what we are to teach, it behoves us to know who is the creative writer.' I nod dutifully, indicating if not my understanding at least my willingness to follow along. She assembles a more professorial face. No wide smile. No narrowing of the eyes. Glasses centred. 'A lot of the committee found

it difficult to understand how creative writing can lead to anything useful. Surely literature and media studies have it covered.'

I ponder, shake my head, struggling with why we are even having this discussion. 'My point was that we need to look at creativity differently because our future students are graduating into an economy where ideas raise the capital rather than land and materials.' I pause for effect, and then continue, a little more enthusiastically. 'And what creative writing does — right at its core and, I would argue, better than any other discipline — is teach students how to work with ideas: how to find them, shape them, develop them, express them. So, there is a clear economic argument, creative writing increases students' employability prospects in any field. I would argue employability is the future measure of university success.'

'Yes, but there's no industrial partnerships on offer for a future as a novelist or poet, Art. And right now industrial partnerships are on the low horizon. That and sizable research grants, which, likewise, don't seem to pop up in your line.' Jarman's tone has an edge to it now, as though any counterclaim I might make will be met with fierce opposition. Donna Gardner looks at me, unsympathetically as far as I can tell.

'The benefits of a creative writing course extend well beyond the capacity to write novels, stories, and scripts for entertainment,' I hear myself saying, although it feels my argument is coming from quite far away. 'Its real power lies in its literacy — skills using language, visual images, and other media to produce, to think, to communicate ways of seeing, new meanings.'

Donna Gardner is sitting back, contemplative, ruminating. She sneaks a sly look at Jarman, thinks I don't see it, and then says, 'Am I right in thinking

that you believe *the idea*, or perhaps it is *story*, is the creative writer's product?'

Advice from le Carre's Peter Guillam sounds a warning. Be generous in small things. Keep the rest in your memory locked, and throw away the key. I offer my best smile.

'Perhaps product is the wrong word, Donna. I prefer to think of it in terms of pursuit and purpose. A pursuit suggests that something in the end is sought, but the creative writer's work is always in the making, there is no end in reality, so it becomes a question of how well the various creative acts it contains satisfy the master prelibation. That might be story, it might be little more than a finely executed image, which I'm sure Mark Turner would describe as a small story. Its purpose, however, is only to provide emergent experiences.'

'I don't see too many job descriptions listing emergent experiences, Lazaar.' Jarman again. 'Why teach it?'

Then Gardner. 'Yes. Surely a study of classical literature has all the stories one needs, and all the grounding needed for, as you say, working with ideas.'

'You do see the flaws in that tired old argument, Donna? It's a reductive approach which, quite frankly tries to teach the impossible: to unpick a way from an extant text back its creative act. *Oh look*, *we've studied a story*, *we've studied structure*, *we've studied characterisation*, *we've studied tension and narrative voice: now you can just go out and make one because you know what it looks like*. It's bullshit. The tools of analysis and criticism are not tools of the creative, but the receptive. Certainly they are useful in enriching a writer's skills, but their focus is on the making of meaning not the making itself. It infects the way we teach creative writing too, relying either on too many teachers schooled in what

you've just mentioned, or the celebrated author supposed to pass on the magic formula — engaging students in writing for evaluated readership rather than understanding what creative practice is and what writing does.'

'Then what do you suggest, Art?' I know she knows this, we've discussed it before. I get the sense she's baiting me so that Jarman gets it from me.

'The other part of the problem is what you've already alluded to: that creative writing needs an industrial outcome, which is a worry in itself. If we continue to allow the culture industries to dominate the discourse, creative writing only serves the production values of those industries and ultimately will diminish in its capacity for creativity. That's not what we're about.'

Jarman looks at me as if I've gone mad and resorts to doodling on the pad in front of her. Double underlining, crossing out, circling. 'Spoken like a true poet,' she says to her pad, before facing me. 'Look, Lazaar, the reason we are having this meeting is because we' — a quick finger movement between Gardner and her — 'believe in your cause. It's a worthy one. You're gifted. We're lucky to have you. But the funding is a problem … although we may have a solution. Vice Chancellor Lipschitz has been in talks with certain interests to establish a fifty million dollar motion picture studio on campus and, we've put our heads together, and think that creative writing might be better housed there. Its — what did you call them? — pursuits would be better served. You think you could make that sing?'

I'd heard the rumours. A slow, soulful response is now called for, although singing is hardly my strong suit. Elise Jarman closes her pad and caps her pen.

'And compose and orchestrate too,' I hear myself say, wondering about the point of it all.

'Then I think we're done here. Coffee, Donna?'

The door closes behind them. I sit alone feeling badly in need of a shower.

3

Tuesday was the one morning each week Hunter set himself against the wall of the church opposite Fremantle's post office in Market Street and read aloud the poetry of C. J. Dennis to an audience of any who cared to stop and listen and perhaps drop a coin or two into the briefcase gawping at his feet like koi at the surface of a pond. A straggle of pedestrians drifted up from the train station, heads bent toward their daily toil in the offices and shops that lined the commercial and tourist precincts, many among them nursing paper cups of steaming lattes or long blacks bought from a vendor along the way, the occasional one dispensing small change into the briefcase.

Hunter paid scarce attention to any audience he attracted, hardly raising an eyebrow at the lanky form in sneakers and jeans, checked shirt and grey sport coat with elbow patches who passed quickly by and, in passing, stooped as though to drop a banknote into the briefcase. A sly nod and he was on his way. Hunter's gaze followed him as he crossed to the post office, smiling at his failure to dodge the splash of a passing motorist. Not quick enough, my friend. But, just as the grey coat faded into the building's gloom, something else caught his attention.

It was a girl he'd first noticed the previous evening, a ghostly form huddled in the shadows of the arcade that housed the post boxes, a queer vision, a statue unnoticed by those entering and leaving the enclave who, in turn, came and went unnoticed by her. What Hunter noticed, even from across the street, was the blank expression. He met her gaze and immediately wished he hadn't, the effort to turn away shadowing a momentary flush of embarrassed impotence he hadn't felt in years.

He had not seen the face before this morning. It offered nothing out of

the ordinary as its image played across his mind; eyes heavy with a burden of fear burrowed so deep nothing reflected; a pasty mouth, its thin line punctuated at each end by cheeks with all the sunken despair of a shipwreck; strokes of stark contrast in the pallor about the gills and the grey beneath her eyes. Nothing familiar, yet everything he had seen before.

It was shortly before the lunch rush, under cover of the sudden arrival of a mob of Chinese tourists, that Hunter managed to retreat unseen. A hulking man, his appearance unkempt, rough and dour, with yellowing teeth, a chisel-pointed beard more salted than peppered, and an injury laden stride that, for all its apparent handicap, enabled a deft navigation of the footpath.

He headed north toward Beach Street and turned up past the deserted wool stores to a narrowly fronted, dilapidated building wedged in between two giant warehouses. He waited and studied the street from the confined space of a gangway between the buildings. When he was sure he hadn't been followed, he forced a rear door and found a space in what was once a kitchen. It stank of rat shit and stale drug use and food remnants, which a horde of ants were industriously reducing to crumbs of cartage size. He scraped away the rancid mess beneath a window with his boot, where a splash of daylight promising a meagre warmth played on the floor. Here he could sit and think. Sit and think and read the mail he retrieved from the envelope disguised to look like a ten dollar note.

It was after ten that night and the city centre seemed deserted except for a gang of listless youths Hunter followed along the cappuccino strip. They were looking for their kind of action and they verballed a load of hoons jockeying past in

a souped up Subaru with a hot-dog exhaust that *blatted* under acceleration, its windscreen fogged from excess testosterone. The cafes were quiet, several had closed early, the bitter cold assaulting the few footpath-diners who had ventured out, sending them home to the warmth of wood-fired heaters and heavy doonas.

Hunter's coat was a poor threat against the cold: the lining had gone and it was torn under the sleeve. He pulled it tightly around his ample girth. Still it struggled to cover a grubby white rayon shirt, which he wore buttoned to the collar, and beneath that an old tee shirt with a weave held together by nothing more than the faded logo of the long defunct rock band brandished across its front. His trousers were old army surplus held up by a rough leather belt threaded through two remaining loops, their one redeeming quality being the numerous pockets which allowed him to stash the various knick-knacks of his secret self in separate places in the event that he should be mugged by younger and more desperate men. It had happened, but now he was better prepared.

He turned a corner into an unlit alley that took him toward the Esplanade. He was known to some of the chefs and sometimes, particularly on slow nights, was fortunate enough to pick up a decent supply of victuals that, under local council regulation, had to be thrown out. He had made a mental note several days earlier to check out a new tapas joint along Packenham street called *Calderos*. It had been open only a couple of weeks and Hunter knew the chef, Paul Gardner: a decent bloke with a good reputation for fine food.

A short lane took him off the street toward the rear of the restaurant. Only a few lights burned at the back of buildings; most were offices, those to the West were part of the ever sprawling Notre Dame University campus.

On his return from the back of the restaurant, he carried a sealed

Styrofoam cup of hot spicy broth. Safely stowed in his briefcase were half a loaf of sourdough bread, a container of marinated olives and half a dozen lamb empanadas. As he reached the point where the lane turned back toward the street, a muffled scream reached his ears. It came from the car park of the end building.

He froze, cracked the top of his briefcase, reached in and withdrew a taser he had scored six months earlier when a cop dropped it during a street brawl. It was kicked into a gutter and Hunter picked it up and continued walking while the brawl raged. It no longer had cartridges but still delivered an effective stun and had saved him on more than one occasion. He placed his briefcase and soup on the ground and entered the car park under the shadow of the near wall and waited while his eyes adjusted to the gloom. On the opposite side of the lot he saw the shape of a large man dragging a much smaller figure toward the road. Even in the dark, and from this distance, he recognised the shapeless form of the garment she wore.

'Hey!' Hunter shouted, moving toward them with uncommon swiftness.

Before he had time to turn, the full jolt of the taser burned into the assailant's left kidney. He screamed and doubled over. Hunter jabbed a second time, this time onto the back of the neck. The pain sent the attacker to the ground. Hunter trod heavily on a hand. Loose stones on the rough bitumen surface bit hard into skin. He tore at Hunter's leg with his free hand, but Hunter increased the pressure and directed the weapon toward the thug's genitals, producing a howl that echoed off the buildings. It died as Hunter swung the butt of the weapon violently down. The sound of a head cracked against the tarmac was a sickening thud. He was still.

They were sat on the curb of a vacant parking bay at the rear of the public, multi-storey car park in Collie Street, close to the stairs, well enough lit and sheltered from the wind. Hunter often used the car park as a late night respite. The floor was devoid of cars except for two at the far end and, even though it closed at midnight on week nights, the rear emergency exit stairs were never locked. The girl drank the spicy broth and he watched some colour return to her face. The left side was swollen and blood oozed from a split in her lip.

He could feel a nightmare looming, the snare of involvement tightening, trapping him. Who the hell are you? he demanded, although not aloud. Why are you following me? What have you got to do with me? Then he gave voice to his thoughts, asking softly, 'Who was he?'

Her English was accented, Arabic for sure. Although not strong, it was as though some residual European language conditioned it. 'He wanted to take me back to them.'

'Them? Who is "them"?'

A sudden rush of blood exploded from her lip as she bit down on it. The gash was deeper than at first he thought. It needed treatment.

Hunter handed her a napkin and coaxed a promise to stay put while he went in search of a dressing for the wound. Five minutes, he said, and left by the fire exit door, jamming a nail into the door bolt to ensure it didn't latch. He went to a pharmacy a few doors up, purchased his supplies and, as he left, was stopped by a man built like a brick shithouse who towered over him.

'Excuse me,' the man said, and held a photograph in front of him. 'Have you seen this girl?'

It wasn't unusual for people to search the streets for lost and missing persons, but two things struck Hunter as odd. The girl in the photograph he was staring at was the same girl he'd left in the car park not five minutes earlier. And the character asking politely after her appeared to have been cloned from the man he'd rescued her from, only bigger.

'No,' he said. 'Who is she?'

'She's been missing since Saturday,' the man said. 'She's not well and her family are worried.'

Hunter studied the man's eyes. Cold, hard, eyes. Green and hooded and very observant. He stood with a bearing that comes from years of military training. He was clean-shaven, head and all, and his fingers holding the photograph were precise and steady. Hunter imagined them curled around a trigger. He turned away to look down the street, as though following the direction of someone, and as he did so pulled a key ring from his pocket. A couple of keys dangled from it and at the end of a short chain what looked like a small light but was in reality a miniature digital camera capable of crystal clear night vision shots.

He turned back to the man and said, 'There was a guy up there, I think, asking the same question.'

The man's eyes followed Hunter's gaze, searching the few bodies walking the streets. Hunter hid his camera hand behind his pharmacy bag, bent over in a coughing fit and snapped off a series of shots, hoping to capture the man's face.

'Yeah, there's a couple of us,' the man said.

'I haven't seen her, but I can ask around. Where's she from?'

'From?'

'Yeah, she looks a bit foreign.'

'I don't know the details.'

'Well, I haven't seen her,' he repeated, 'but if you've got a card or something …'

'A card?' The man fixed a cold stare on Hunter.

'Yeah … in case I see her and you want me to let you know …'

'Never mind I'll keep looking.'

'Suit yourself,' Hunter said, and moved past him.

She was still where he'd left her, the soup cup was cleaned out and half of the empanadas gone. He was pleased with this. He dressed the wound on her mouth and sat in silence while he removed the data card from the miniature camera and inserted it into a tiny portable viewer. He clicked through the images and brought up the face of the man in the street.

'Who's this?'

She didn't answer, just bowed her head. He asked again.

'A bad man.' She said it to her feet.

'Okay,' Hunter persisted, 'why is he looking for you?'

She continued to study her feet. 'You're a good man,' she said. 'He's a bad man.'

'And the other guy? The one from earlier?'

'He is also a bad man. They work for other bad men.'

'So, we have a good man and two bad men. And you. Why have you been following me?'

'You're a good man.'

'Maybe. Maybe not.'

'I can tell — you are a good man. You help people. I think you will help me.'

'I can take you to the women's shelter — they can help you.'

Her head came up suddenly. Her eyes flared. 'No. They will find me. I will stay with you.'

'With me? You can't stay with me.' Although he said this with some force, the feeling inside belied Hunter's words. He sensed that her roads had come to a complete dead end.

'I have to … if they find me …' Her eyes played into her hands in her lap, but they suddenly snapped up and caught Hunter's gaze directly. She knew precisely what lay in store. 'They will kill me.'

Hunter couldn't look away. His words, even to his ears, had the hollow ring of a drainpipe. Nothing he could think of would do. The best he managed was, 'The women's shelter is safe—'

She cut him off. 'No. Not from them. *They* know how to find people. I must stay with you.'

Hunter's frustration mounted. What to do with her? Can't just leave her here. Maybe she is ill.… Aloud, he said, 'You said they want to *kill* you … why?'

'They murdered my brother.'

Hunter pointed at the photograph. 'He said your family was worried.'

'My brother was all I had left.' She stifled a sob with a gasping breath. 'They killed him. And now they want to kill me.'

Hunter was silent for several moments as though contemplating a different tack. Eventually he said, 'I have a daughter about your age.' He thought about what he would expect of a decent man were his daughter in a similar

situation. 'I know what it's like.'

'Is she gone?'

'Gone? Yes she's gone — they've all gone.'

'She is dead?'

'No she isn't dead. I'm dead.'

She smiled at that. 'How long have you been dead?'

'Nearly ten years. The only reason I'm still here is because I don't exist. And I can't risk that — you understand?' She nodded. Once again he held up the picture of the man in the street. 'You need to tell me why you think this guy wants to kill you? Who is he?'

'If I tell you, they may want to kill you too.'

'They would be too late. I told you, I'm already dead.'

4

Marking student work is the grind for any teacher. It takes time and concentration and is a generally unrewarding investment and for me it's often last minute. Like tonight, where I'm pounding my way through student's commentaries on how they are unfolding their story.

In my assessment of student work, I'm not looking so much for the quality of what a student puts on the page — something Elise Jarman had said in our meeting — but evidence of their investment in searching for something unique that will ultimately inform what goes on the page. An observation that yields an effect wanted. I want my students doing more than the writing alone — I want them thinking about how they make the writing happen and discussing it in terms of an understanding they draw from creative writing as practice, both their own and that of others. I say this even though I fully subscribe to the notion that more often than not it is the writing that yields what happens, there is value in working an idea up from the observation that triggers it through to an articulation of the story idea that produces a vision of an effect wanted and how that idea is formed. The final result may be a departure, but it helps to have a vision in the first place.

Much of this, of course, flies in the face of academic received wisdom, and if I were to follow the guidance proposed by Donna Gardner this morning, I would pursue the marking of student work on the basis of the literary theories we are invested in, perhaps structuralist and post-structuralist married somehow with the contexts arising from identity and society, maybe even drawing on the nihilists and formalists who have informed so much of our understanding around literature, especially in the face of those who declare authors to be either dead or irrelevant. I would be commenting on vacuous

issues like *vividness*, *control of language*, *cliche*, *originality*, *economy and coherence* … and much more. I say vacuous because they are terminology obtained from the world of readership in which a text exists and has had time to assimilate with both its audience and the society in which it survives. And, of course, where many of the authors are, in fact, dead. The creative writer's work is not in this place.

I have no truck with this model. It insists on a conformity which works against the creative writing student forging a model of their own person. And, even though I may have a substantial repertoire of sensibilities which can differentiate between good and bad sentences; vivid, exciting, blurred and flat scenes, I would fail one of Thomas McCormack's basic tenets of *responding aptly* as the *ideal appropriate reader*. I tell my students that they do not need to be told whether their work is good or not. Instead, I say, you need to know whether the work you are doing is taking you closer to understanding how you think, so your thinking, once inscribed, can find its ideal appropriate reader. If, of course, that's where you want it to go.

This is stuff from my first lecture of the program. 'Your writing will find its ideal appropriate reader,' I tell them, 'if you engage in a pursuit that brings joy to yourself first, and if you consciously eschew notions of imitation to satisfy a completely misunderstood set of literary standards that have been cemented in place by scholars trying less to understand writing, but are instead focused on the written.

'When Salman Rushdie sits down to write, he says *his mind works in a way that it otherwise doesn't work*. He is identifying his engagement with the forming of ideas and his mind is working to reel them in. None of us can see

into the mind of another, so we need our writing to explore what we are seeing in our own minds.'

I scrawl marks and comments on papers that I hope will encourage students to focus on these matters, not on what they have read in other people's work.

5

Wednesday August 7 — 31 days before the election

It was three in the morning when Hunter led the girl to his bunker, the location of which is one of Fremantle's best kept secrets — one he intended to keep. Along Henderson Street he stopped and insisted she wear a blindfold. She resisted at first, a reluctance he fully understood, but his insistence won out and he guided her drunkenly around two blocks before arriving under the cover of regrown trees and shrubs that hid a wire gate in the embankment of the football oval. He led her in, keeping the blindfold in place until they had turned the corner into the main tunnel. It meant protecting her head in sections where the limestone walls and ceiling had collapsed before a sharp turn left led to the main tunnel. Here, they stood upright and walked by torchlight for fifty or sixty metres before arriving into a good sized room.

When Hunter found it in 2009, he quickly came to the conclusion that the room was originally set up as a bunker during World War II by the prison warden of the day. The tunnel itself, though, could have been part of a network between the harbour and the prison built at the end of the nineteenth century. A quick inspection gave him a clear impression that it hadn't been visited for nigh on fifty years. Two old, steel framed, wire mesh cots sat side by side against one wall, their kapok mattresses frosted in calcified dust, cockroach husks and rat droppings. A square, green Laminex table and four chairs sat in the middle of the room, and a kitchen safe stocked with canned goods from the early nineteen-forties lined a wall beneath a single light bulb and a Bakelight power point — which he pleasantly discovered were still connected to an electricity supply. A shallow alcove held a solitary water tap servicing an enamel basin draining into a sluice running out through the rock. Hunter claimed it that day, changed the lock on the gate, and has used it as his hideaway ever since.

The room the girl entered, though, was clean and homey in a Hunter

kind of way.

Her name was Falullah Salim. She had fled Iraq with her older brother, Ishmail, in May 2004. She was eleven years old.

These facts Hunter established quite early in the piece and he was instantly in sympathy. We are kin, he thought, fellow asylum seekers. Getting to the here and now, though, was much more an exercise akin to drawing sap from driftwood. It came in dribs and drabs and the incoherence added a layer of realism Hunter found strangely absorbing. He was her captive by the time he learnt about her escape from the place of community detention, where she had been held since her release from Christmas Island in July 2010.

She did this on Saturday evening.

The escape was both spontaneous and daring. She was in a bus with no windows, a bus in which she had been transported to and from a factory of hard, unpaid labour six days of every week for the past three years. Other than to make this daily journey, she had been outside the compound where she was kept only on three occasions. On those occasions she was escorted at night with other girls from the compound to a luxurious mansion to wait in service upon rich and powerful men. She had seen nothing of where she was, knew nothing of the people or the place.

On Saturday evening, at one point in the return journey, the bus had pulled up at a set of traffic lights and, without giving it a second thought, Falullah wrenched the handle of the vehicle's side door, flung it open and leapt out into traffic and ran. She ran with nothing in her mind other than to put as much distance between herself and the vehicle as Allah would provide. By good fortune she ran towards Fremantle and hid in the shadows of the streets, where she

happened to see Hunter assist an elderly woman who had fallen. She decided he was a good man and felt somehow he would protect her. She chose to follow him.

The man he'd met in the street, she maintained, had been hired to take her back to the compound, where, she emphasised, she was certain she would be killed, just like her brother. Her eyes were heavy and red-rimmed, and when her head fell toward her chest, she straightened up in sudden jerks. She was exhausted, but Hunter pressed on.

'Who runs this compound?' he asked.

'Yusuf.'

'Does Yusuf have another name?'

'Many names, I'm sure — none of them the one he was given at birth. But I know him only as Yusuf. He's a bad man.'

'Just Yusuf? On his own?'

'No, Yusuf has many men who work for him.'

'Like those two tonight?'

'I have only seen one of them before. He had visited Yusuf with another man, a small man with shifty eyes. Yusuf's people are Asian.'

'All men?'

'Yes, all men. They have dogs that patrol the grounds. Two men drive us from the compound to the factory every day. The bus has no windows so we cannot see out. The compound has high walls, men guard its doors — we were not permitted to leave. At the factory, we were kept separate from other workers and prepared and packed food, but not talk, we were not allowed.'

Slowly, piece by piece, her story began to unfold under Hunter's gentle prodding.

Her family had lived in Baqubah, a small town forty kilometres north of Baghdad. Her father was a driver, working for the French Embassy. Then, one day early in 2004, armed and masked men came to the town and started rounding up and executing people who spoke languages other than Arabic. Originally they targeted Kurdish speakers, but once they had the taste of blood, any language would do, and the Salims spoke several: French, German and English among them. They were separated. Falullah and her brother fled to Baghdad where they were helped by an uncle. News reached them that their father had been executed in the town square, but her mother and two younger brothers had been hidden by friends and later escaped to the north. The uncle made arrangements for Falullah and her brother to travel to Pakistan, where they would be met by an agent who would get them to Australia — the safest place in the world, he'd said. Similar arrangements would be made for their mother and brothers to follow. It was the best thing.

'Your brother was with you?'

'After we left Christmas Island, we were separated … we were not allowed to see each other. Then they killed him.'

'Who killed him? How do you know?'

'One of Yusuf's men showed me a picture … they hung him by his feet from a chain and cut his throat.'

She didn't say any more after that. Not for a long time. Hunter scratched feverishly into a tattered notebook, his writing more like hieroglyphics than actual letters forming words. It was a codified form of shorthand he had used for years.

She slept for the better part of Wednesday.

And while she slept, Hunter wrote on a miniature laptop he extracted from beneath the kitchen safe. He worked at a feverish pace, his words hitting the screen at the speed of thought. As he wrote, he wondered about the eternal human search for safe harbours in violent seas. About the conditioning of a country that excels at demonising the asylum seeker, a product, he believed, of having never suffered war on its own turf. Where the privileged sit at a safe distance from any human suffering, protected by walls of wealth — walls topped by shards of influence and the razor wire of White Western values. Blind people. Blind and resentful. Mean to the level of an art form, their money distancing the ills of society, protecting them from the criminal class that greed creates, from the underbelly they do not want to see. An underbelly that produces the asylum seeker.

Hunter found a necessary asylum in plain sight, choosing to be, at least for some of the time, in the same place as a wife and daughter he can never see. More than nine years earlier he'd been deep in a story investigating criminal activities on the docks when the lives of his wife and daughter were threatened and he was given the choice to disappear or they would die. He left. But he returned, transformed, in the unrecognisable guise of a homeless man, confident no Gordioni would ever look a homeless person in the eye, he became invisible. At the time of his exile, Hunter's daughter was eleven. Last birthday she turned 20. Every year, May the fifth, he buys a gift. Nine gifts sit unopened in safe storage waiting for the day he hopes he can deliver them.

The girl sleeping in the cot was of similar age. She was eleven when she fled Iraq with her brother. Seventeen when she was taken from Christmas Island into community detention. Although she seemed skinny and undernourished, she was pretty, traces of Arab and Romanian parentage in the fine bone structure and

golden hue of her skin. Her hair, although lank and unshaped, had the potential of full body. And she moved with a kind of elegance that belied the years of suffering, of captivity, of a crushed spirit that she must have endured. He looked on her as she slept, the way a father looks over a daughter, her chest rising and falling beneath the old, grey woollen army blanket he had tucked around her. Her breathing was laboured, increasingly catching in an asthmatic rattle, definitely not helped by the cold and damp. He made a mental note to pick up a Ventolin when he went out later.

Hunter drummed away at the keyboard, working on a weekly column he wrote for the *Herald* under the byline, *Balsa Mick*. It was a regular job he performed for one of the two people he trusted with the secret of his identity. Some of the income it earned came to him, but most went into a secret bank account for his wife and daughter. The managing editor and proprietor of the paper was long time friend Michael Porter, a colleague from his days at *The Kalgoorlie Miner* in the early seventies. His column gave the ordinary people a view of life both from and for the man in the street — humanity's fly-weight in a morally corrupt society, is how he first described Balsa Mick to Porter. A cartoon character who sucks irony out of bombast, irreverent and self-deprecating, speaking the language of the everyman.

He connected with Porter twice a week, but they also maintained channels for an emergency contact.

Every Tuesday the lanky streak passes by his corner near the Wesley Church and drops an envelope into his briefcase — what Hunter calls his mail. The envelope's contents vary, but usually there will be five crisp twenty dollar bills and a micro SD card. Sometimes there was a hastily scrawled note in Porter's own unique shorthand — practically indecipherable to anyone but himself and

Hunter — containing news of his wife and daughter, a comment on his column or a response to a request for information.

Porter was well-liked in Fremantle. His paper held an enviable reputation of support for worthy causes, providing a timely and comprehensive coverage of political, social and corporate happenings in the city. He sits on the boards of the Fremantle Arts Centre, Amman Aged Care and St Patrick's Day Centre, which is where, every Wednesday evening, a plain envelope finds its way to him. The package Hunter delivered that evening contained the micro SD card with the week's column — *Balsa Mick's Theatre Experience: the Canberrean Tragedy of Ruddio and Julia*. He also included images of the man he encountered in the street searching for Falullah and a request that Porter discreetly try to identify him. Although he suspected it would be an impossible task. He could tell a man who didn't have an identity.

When Hunter returned that night, she was sitting up. He fed her and gave her the Ventolin inhaler, checking that she knew how to use it. He heated water over the primus stove and she took a duck bath at the enamel basin. Later, they sat at the small table and Hunter asked about her mother and brothers.

'They died,' she said.

'Yes. You said. But how do you know that?'

'They told me.'

For a moment Hunter was confused. 'They?…'

'Yusuf and another man.'

'Do you know this other man … was he an Australian?'

'He was the man who got us from Christmas Island. I think he is a lawyer. His name is Mister Singh … he was, I think, a bit arrogant. He said we

would do well with Yusuf because we could speak English. He said we would have a good life.'

'We … your brother and you?'

'Yes. There were others, but I didn't know them at the time.'

'And you were taken to the compound … under the care of Yusuf?'

'Not my brother, he was taken somewhere else. I wasn't allowed to see him, but a man called Mahmoud was sometimes on the bus to the factory. My brother worked for Yusuf cleaning offices; Mahmoud would tell me news of him.'

'How did they know your mother died?'

For a long time she didn't answer. She only stared into the depths of her tea cup, as though somehow the secrets of her past might remain hidden in the soaked out tea bag.

Hunter prodded. 'Listen, Falullah, if I'm to help you, you have to tell me what you can.'

She shook her head. 'I can't,' she said. 'They will kill me. It is why they killed Ishmail.'

'They can only kill you if they can find you. What I propose is that we make it very difficult for them to do that while we bring your brother's killers to justice.'

'How can you do that?'

'Oh, don't worry,' Hunter said, almost as though convincing himself, 'I know a man we can trust to do both.'

6

Thursday August 8 — 30 days before the election

It's a morning tutorial and we are discussing my feedback to students on their commentaries of how they are unfolding their stories. Why do we do this? One student asks, and I respond by throwing the question back to the class.

'Is it because writing is hard?' another student asks.

'Why are you asking me?' I counter. 'I want to know what you *think*.' I place the emphasis on the final verb, not the noun. It is my way of establishing intention. 'What have you read recently that can help you understand why we do this?'

Of course, I am talking about why we write at all, but I'm being deliberately obtuse because I want them to arrive rather than be driven.

Laura Johnson, as usual, has a response. 'We do it because our course says we have to — I read it in the course outline, otherwise we fail.' It gets a laugh. Even from me.

'Yes, that's true, but a bit of a worry if you think that's what we're looking for.' There's a particular silence that falls over a class when the students are trying to figure out what answer they are expected to give and no one is brave enough to set sail. The waiting begins.

'I read a thing by Philip Pullman recently,' a student sitting off to one side offers at length. 'He says authors can't really be trusted to tell the truth about what they intended — they might not even know.'

'Great start,' I say, 'but is intention the same as the question of why we write?'

'Perhaps it's about thinking,' another student offers.

'What do you mean by that?' I ask.

He is hesitant, showing signs of a struggle for how to express his notion

rather than the value of the notion itself. I know exactly how that feels.

'I think it first comes down to a question of why are we here,' he says, 'what is our purpose? and to what end can we pursue the fulfilment of that?' Already I am warming to this line. Others are too. 'Perhaps it's not about just getting a job, or being a *something* in a commercial space for the sake of earning money, which you then use to buy your place in society. Maybe we write because our thinking needs to find a place to be; if it just stays in our heads, it will rot, atrophy, decay, disappear.'

'Maybe you should be a teacher,' another student suggests.

But the student holding the floor is not to be put off. 'Thornton Wilder said writers firmly guide their readers to what they should think. It seems to me that writing is about shifting the weight of that thinking onto the shoulders of others so they might do something with it. Pullman might be right that most authors, novelists perhaps, don't know what their intentions are, and anyway, that may have changed once the book is in the minds of readers. But the thinking has taken up new residence.'

'So,' I say, picking up the silence, 'you worry about the simplistic idea that we write to inform, to persuade, to entertain?'

'There has to be some of that,' he says, 'but it seems to me that writing is like negotiating a treaty between analysis and action. I don't think we can really know what drives artistic purpose, it's a weird concept to think "why am I here?" in terms of the reasons behind being here, in this room, with these people, at this time, doing … *this*. Maybe some minute decision way back when I was a little kid led me to this. It makes me think that intentions are elusive, and that suggests to me that writing is both self-conscious and innocent of any intentions.'

A great segue to something I have in mind for them to think a little more about.

'Okay, so do we, then, have a responsibility to either open up or close down the gaps in society through the stories we tell?'

I know this is rhetorical, so I continue.

'Think about the way story unfolds as something that points to opening up the middle space between the subject of your story — its premise — and you as the initial observer finding something unique in your observation that brings the premise into focus. We do this by allowing ourselves to get lost in the dialogue between our inner voice doing the composing, and ourselves as thinkers doing the ordering. In the end, we arrive at something we could call an interpretation — our composition shapes the thinking, but the thinking is never fully composed.'

One of the students who rarely contributes to discussion, a shy girl, raises a hand. 'I think I get it,' she says, her wide eyes pleading confirmation. 'In the story model, you ask us to consider what someone — the character — wants, but to find or recognise why they don't already have that. This is a concept of the middle space, because it's a gap, it's not closed — a difference. And society is made up of these gaps, right?' — imploring consent from those nearest — 'people are always wanting but there are forever obstacles. It's dynamic, opening and closing, and this space between is what we see as the potential; how we find ways to fill and manipulate those gaps is our unique contribution to it.'

I smile and say, 'Yes, I think you're onto something. One worry we are often faced with is how difficult it is to define circumstances as they actually are, because no two realities are identical, which means we must pay attention

to the difference. You've all thought about a character and a desire, and what is standing in the way of that character realising their desire, and how they might act to achieve it … some of you have a concept of how that desire, resistance and action might transform the final circumstance. But that transformation can't happen unless there is a space — a gap, if you like — for the actions to fill.'

I pause, look around the room, and ask: 'How many of you really believe you know what is going to happen in those moments of a character reaching, reacting and acting?' None. 'It's clear then, isn't it? We, each of us, want to understand more than we already know' — I pause — 'a gap? … and the only way we can do that is explore in every way possible those differences. And this,' I'm reaching finality here, 'is why we write. Because, by writing, we explore what we don't yet know.' I hand out copies of two short chapters from Will Blythe's book, *Why I Write*. 'Read these,' I say, 'and take note of what both Norman Mailer and David Foster-Wallace say about truth as a writer's calling.'

Ricard Koffi has sat quietly though all this. 'Hey, Art,' he calls.

'Yes?'

'My character, right, his name's Issa, it means he sees … well, he wants to live a better life, a freer life, that's his truth I suppose. But he sees a murder … is this is resistance to him achieving his freer life?'

'I take it that he's afraid they might have seen him. Unless you regard death as a freer life, which would defintiely be something of a worry. I would say he doesn't want to be caught. What does he do to not be caught and killed, what fills that gap? In the end, does he move some way toward getting his freer life? How are his circumstances transformed by the experience?'

'Okay. Well he can't go to the cops. Perhaps he could kill them, but if

he did manage that, it might make things worse, yeah?'

'So the gap you need to explore is what is it in his circumstances that could lead to freedom. Perhaps in some perverse way, it is murder.'

'Maybe it is truth,' one of the other students offered. 'I mean, if truth is not a fixed thing, then it's a gap, isn't it? You know, different perspectives give different truths. Maybe that's a difference you could explore.'

Ricard Koffi offered his thanks with a broad grin and made a note. 'Yeah, I like that. Maybe the truth is a victim of murder.'

I don't quite know why, but something about that exchange unsettles me, staying not far from my conscious thought for the rest of the day.

Hunter's message reaches me just after three.

It is like any other message from the university's email exchange, only this one stresses an urgency that clearly points to something being up. It comes from a hidden address I organised soon after joining the faculty in 2009. I had the help of Will Feynman, a maturing code cracker who joined the university's IT department following a dubious career that began when he was about thirteen, and went on to include numerous government contracts he's not allowed to talk about. Wi Fi, as he is known on campus, appreciates an economic system that trades in favours without qualification, questions or an obvious paper trail — digital or otherwise. He is a useful chap.

The message is in a code Hunter introduced to me when I was a cadet journalist working under him at *The Kalgoorlie Miner* in the mid seventies. Back then it was pieces of paper left on desks and notice boards, but essential to reporting on the legal outpourings of an environment built around drugs, robbery, vice and

wild west policing. We had to communicate important information in a way that could not be compromised. To outsiders it seemed a silly game in which we competed in the rewriting of famous Australian poetry. A poem by C. J. Dennis indicated a meeting, its place and time buried in the words. A poetic coincidence indicated more was afoot than either of us would consider normal.

I am deeply intrigued. It is the first I've heard from him in over a year. I re-read the email.

Hist Hark, until it's very dark …
Six Glugs of Gosh partake their nosh
Across the dossing park.
Frith Froth, it's paddy dons the cloth …
Two bugs to squash a mackintosh
And sup the brother broth.

Just before five-thirty, I park in a Fremantle side street up behind a historic building, once the lunatic asylum, but now, fittingly perhaps, the Fremantle Arts Centre. I retrieve a threadbare sport jacket, old lumber shirt and canvas trousers from a bag I keep in the boot of my car. My transformation takes a couple of minutes and is completed with a pair of broken sneakers, a filthy Dockers beanie on my head and an old carry bag stuffed with rags. A bottle of cheap wine I'd bought at a drive through on the way down is wasted over my hands and face, and I smear dirt and grime to complete the image. I affect a slouch and limp my way down the hill across Fremantle Park and along Queen Victoria Street to arrive at St Patrick's on the dot of six. The wind is bitter, low clouds hover over the harbour.

Hunter sits at a table, partly obscured by a niche wall remaining from the abutment of what were once two separate buildings, his nose buried in one of his notebooks and pen screaming across the pages, a steaming cup of tea in front of him. The rich aroma of pea and ham soup and steamed vegetables storms from the kitchen and I realise at that moment I am famished. I drop my rag bag on the floor at the table and saunter to the servery, order soup, lamb stew and vegies, a cup of black tea and return to the table to sit opposite the man I'd come to see.

He glances at me and looks back down. 'You smell terrible, Lazaar.'

'You did say, "don the cloth".'

'I didn't say drown it. What the fuck did you use?'

'McWilliams muscat. Wouldn't want to use something I'd rather drink.'

'You're a cheap bastard, Lazaar.' He looks up at me and a smile lights his eyes for the briefest of moments. 'Although you do look as though you could do with a decent feed. A shave and bath probably wouldn't go astray either.'

He is right about how I look. I wait and eventually Hunter puts his pen down. He surveys the nearby tables, probably to decide the level of voice he should use.

My stomach growls. I tear up a slice of bread and float the pieces in my soup. Hunter watches me shovel generous spoonfuls into my mouth, my slurps signalling both my hunger and my appreciation. 'Many Middle Eastern girls at your university?' he asks.

'Some. In fact, there's a couple in my creative writing unit. Why?'

'We need to hide one — best if she can be one of a crowd.' I must have looked a little stunned. 'Like me, hidden where people won't see,' he adds.

'Jesus, Hunter. How the fuck can I do that?'

'There's murder involved.' He's dropped his voice to a whisper, but that's a word I hear loud and clear. It's like the smell of a fix to a junkie.

'Murder?' Dim dots float somewhere beyond my mental vision, but the sense they needed connecting lingers.

'And if we don't protect her' — a pause to let the *we* sink in — 'there'll be another one.'

He launches into the details of Falullah Salim's story and then explains what he has in mind. My soup grows cold as I sit spellbound, attempting to come to terms with what — on the face of it at least — seems a preposterous idea. When I come out of my reverie, I have to backtrack a little.

'Slave labour? Here, in Perth?'

'Looks that way.'

'Doesn't seem real.'

'Trust me, the bloke I zapped and the other one in the street were very real, and they mean to find her.'

By this stage my brain is working overtime. 'Are we supposing they are the murderers?'

'You're the one with the poetic licence, Lazaar, you need to put it to work. And before they — whoever they may be — find her.'

'It's a cop job, surely.'

'Doubt they'll have too many clues. Porter did some digging and tells me there is a murder investigation but they haven't released any details because they haven't identified the victim. I don't know if it's her brother, but it seems a reasonable assumption.' His green eyes, clear and steady, drill into me. 'This is a young girl's life, Lazaar. She's in deep shit and the feeling in my bones tells me

it's way beyond the league of local cops.'

We sit in silence while I chew on the facts.

Ishmail Salim's murder most likely came about because of a complicated deal with a network of people smugglers, the seeds of its unravelling sown on the morning of September 15, 2010. That morning, an asylum seeker boat crashed into rocks at Christmas Island, broke up and sank, leaving ninety people struggling in wild and treacherous seas. Forty-eight died, among them the mother and two younger brothers of Ishmail and Falullah Salim. When the man called Yusuf secured Ishmail and Falullah's release into community detention from Christmas Island, he made the travel arrangements for the mother and siblings, a journey to be paid for by their indenture. They would work for him for five years to pay off the debt. After five years, Yusuf told her, you will be free in Australia and together as a family. It was a deal too good to refuse. For the first time in over six years, they had hope.

It was Mahmoud who told her of her brother's death. He said Ishmail told Yusuf that his failure to deliver their mother and brothers safely to Australia meant there was no debt to be paid, that he and his sister should be free. He threatened to escape and go to the authorities. His murder was a perfectly logical solution: it satisfied all plausibility. Except now Falullah had escaped. And that compounded the risks.

'How does she know?' I ask, feigning a level of perplexity I do not feel.

If Hunter saw through it, he didn't let on. 'Know what?'

'The murder. How did she know they murdered him?'

'They took a picture and showed it to her. One of those cheap digital

cameras. She described it to me.'

I sit back, watching the fleeting light of my escape glimmering in the distance. 'So she knows who did it? Seems simple enough. If the cops have a murder, she knows who did it because they showed her a picture, all she has to do is tell them. They'll connect the dots. I don't need to get involved.'

Hunter stares at me. 'She doesn't know who did it. The picture doesn't show who did it. The guy who showed it to her didn't do it.'

'But he had the camera. Did he take the picture?'

That stops him. 'That's unclear,' he says, finally.

'These two thugs are a bit of a worry,' I say. 'They don't fit the other facts of the story.'

'Exactly my point,' Hunter returns. 'You have no choice — *We* have no choice.'

My stomach churns. It is one thing to be fighting for my academic future with a new dean and threats of politically motivated funding cuts, and removal of my discipline to a subset of media studies, but to do what Hunter is asking is at an altogether different level. I thought when I acquired an academic position I would be resting on my laurels, reflecting on my past, perhaps even glorify it in print and performance; enjoy the women around me, revel in the exuberance of youth and waste my time investigating lost theories of a paradise found.

But he demands, instead, that I enter the present moment and tap its music and rhythms to find a way into the secret places of the souls of dangerous forces about which I have no idea. And if I don't, at least one young woman would very likely die.

'Look, Hunter—'

'No Lazaar. You look. I didn't ask for this to land in my lap, but it has. That means it's also in yours. That's the way of this thing. You have no choice.'

He is right of course. I have no choice. 'Did Porter happen to find out who got the case?'

Hunter smiles, tilts his head back and looks at me through narrowed eyes. 'You're gonna love it,' he says. 'Although I'm thinking it might have more effect if I left it to you to discover.'

I gesture with open hands. 'Well, if you want to waste time …'

'Kelly Boulter.'

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7

Friday August 9 — 29 days before the election

Roger Lamord stood before the plate glass window of his third floor office overlooking North Cottesloe beach, staring into a pea soup of weather, imagining that he was at the helm of a massive ship cutting a path into a bleak sea. The building is a beach-front mansion with three above-ground storeys, an undercroft and a secure lower level parking garage accessed directly off Marine Terrace. The top floor, with its superstructure-like aspect, housed his personal suite, a boardroom, a kitchen and bathroom. It was from here that he directed SANCO, a conglomerate of companies providing food, cleaning, logistics, security, and construction services to governments, airlines, hospitals and all manner of remote operations. A corporate empire he'd grown quickly and silently, beneath the radar of public scrutiny, generating revenues in excess of half a billion dollars in the last quarter alone. An empire built by hand with cunning and hard work.

It was also here where he felt the thrill of living, because Roger Lamord made men. And by making men, he also destroyed men. While his business had made him immensely wealthy, he found money to be a small cog in the greater wheel of earthly fortunes. The real currency was influence. After serving several years as President of the Western Australian branch of the Liberal Party, he had graduated to the more noble role of serving his country. Now, it was he who decided who could stand for a seat and make laws for the state and this side of the nation. Others, of course, thought they had a say. The local branches thought they had a say. The Premier thought he had a say. And one of the secrets of power that Lamord had learnt along the way was to foster those beliefs, let them believe they had a say. Eventually, their say was always what he said it would be.

At five-thirty, Lamord went through his private door to the boardroom, which ran along the southern side of the building, its large, tinted windows looking out across the roofs of Cottesloe and west to Rottnest Island and the Indian Ocean

horizon. Streetlights and headlights and lights from windows snaked and flashed in the rain. The Norfolk pines, the famous beach's iconic landmarks, ghostly spires rising above the rooftops. A polished table hewn from a single slab of tingle sourced from the Great Southern forest dominated the room. Around it sat twenty-six chairs hand-crafted from the same tree, upholstered in a fabric from wild hemp, the colour, Hunter Green. A large landscape of the Swan Valley vineyard where Lamord had spent his teenage years, hung on the eastern wall. The artist's fine palette and even finer eye had captured the sunburst of a spring morning's early rays as they broke over the Darling Scarp and played through a rising mist onto dew drops clinging to budding new fruit. A symbol of the first steps to greatness.

The room was state of the art: soundproofed by a floating floor and vacuum insulated walls, windows and ceiling; air conditioning ducts isolated and inaccessible; electrical and communications cables routed through non-impact media. The security team had earlier swept it for bugs, a weekly ritual to keep the realities of the modern world top of mind.

Sean Dower, managing director of his security firm SECSUR, and Samantha Codlin his media adviser, were seated opposite each other, waiting. Lamord greeted them both and reached to a wine rack beneath a credenza of polished York gum and wandoo, selected a bottle of Shiraz from his own vintage, and poured a glass for each of them; then took his seat at the head of the table facing the landscape. He toasted the painting and wafted the wine's bouquet with a deep breath, its heady mix of spicy berry and black current aromas planting a salivant delight on his tongue, which he savoured for a long moment, drawing out the full pleasure before the first tasting. When it came, it exploded in his mouth like a cherry bomb. He swallowed with a self satisfied smile and turned to Dower.

'Are we set?'

Dower had returned that morning from a ten day business trip to Indonesia. He leaned back in his chair and smiled. Although he had been in Australia for almost twenty-five years, his Irish accent remained strong.

'It's looking pretty fine, Roj. Seven boats in Cilicap, five in Pacitan, a dozen in Surabaya, nine in Kupang — more in the pipeline, of course.' He paused long enough for Lamord to contemplate the numbers.

'And our exposure?'

'We've commissioned a new line of packaging out of Yogyakarta. I advanced half a million toward that. And there's some new kitchen, storage and transport equipment on order from Surabaya. We've advanced a further half million toward that. Should cover it, to be sure. The money will find its way through the chain.'

'Expensive stoves and fridges, Sean,' Lamord said, a sardonic smile crossing his lips. 'Run into any problems up there?'

'Me? Roj, when do I ever run into problems?'

'It's been known. Bali last year might be something to talk about.'

'You know I'm never going to talk about that. It's not something that will happen again, to be sure. Spotters are wary of informants up there now. The AFP have infiltrated some networks in the kampungs, paying big bucks for deal makers. I hear they've been fed a few dodgy ones — seems they've got our government running in circles. Typical. Word is, there's one or two on our side, but softly softly. How's the polling?'

'Two or three points ahead overall,' Codlin said.

She ran a team of surveillance and media specialists from a secure bunker on the second basement level at the rear of the building. Her networks tapped ministers, party officials, industry leaders across the country and the region. If

it's been uttered, said in an email, spoken over a mobile phone, discussed in party rooms, posted in social media, her team sources and flags it. Lamord watched her as she scanned an iPad screen. It reflected onto her glasses. These are new, he noticed. They sit a little lower and emphasise those fine cheek bones. New man too? I wonder.

Lamord took a pull at his glass, let the wine rest on his tongue for a long moment, swallowed. 'We've got four weeks to election day. I want twenty on the water before then, and one to arrive on the day. Clear?'

'Dower whistled. 'Twenty.' He drained his glass. 'Doable. That'd be around fifteen-hundred IAs.' Illegal arrivals.

'Perfect. The New Guinea solution will overload — it'll be a disaster.' Lamord allowed himself a little smile. 'Make it a flood.' He shifted his gaze to Codlin. 'Media inserts?'

He was referring to people, not fliers.

'One on string in TV, three in press, I'm negotiating with a radio jock, we've got a series of op-eds lined up. Two stringers on the ground in Indonesia — one in Kupang and one in Surabaya.'

'Arm's length?' Lamord asked.

'Oh, absolutely,' Codlin shot back. 'As far as they're concerned, all they get is a Wikileaks feed. They have no idea it's from us. Nor can they trace it back.'

Lamord felt satisfied with that. Driving a campaign was about driving his people, and both Codlin and Dower cared what happened, cared that this country was at risk of becoming a welfare haven. No one wanted that. 'What're the hot buttons?' he asked.

Her clear blue eyes held his. She pushed a recalcitrant lock of blonde hair away from her face. At forty, she was still a desirable woman.

'People hate the thought of illegal immigrants coming on boats. They don't say it, but it's quite clear from the research that voters don't like potential terrorists coming here aided and abetted by Indonesians. This is a vote winner, Roger. All our man has to do is keep pointing to how this government leaves open invitations for people smugglers to do business here.' She flashed a smile at both men. 'And let's face it, they're raking it in.'

Lamord laughed. 'Well, we do our bit for international trade. How about you feed LOTO' — leader of the opposition — 'that line about Labor policies opening the flood gates. It'll work well — especially if we ramp it up.'

Dower cut in. 'All we have to do is get it started, the operators themselves will ramp it up — we can step back — cut the risk of exposure.'

'How will you sell it to the voters?' Lamord asked.

'Self-defence and rescue story,' Codlin replied. 'We will protect the borders, stop the boats, and save lives at sea.'

'Save lives?'

'Yes. Asylum seekers who get on boats drown — all the voter really needs to know is that's a direct result of Labor policies. And because we know how the people-smuggler business operates, stopping the boats will be easy. It will just look like it's been done with policies.'

Operation Sovereign Borders. It was deceptively simple and a guarantee of election victory like no other in the history of this country. And he, Roger Lamord, would be the one who made it possible.

Dower waited for the door to close behind Codlin as she left the room. He stood to refill the glasses. Lamord sensed the move was covering a certain discomfort. He waited. When Dower sat again, he shifted in his chair as though scratching an itch he couldn't politely reach. 'There's a problem', he said. 'Yus-less Abacus

has lost a bead.'

'Come again,' Lamord said, his wine glass poised mid arc to his mouth. 'I take it you're referring to Yusuf? I thought you sorted that out last week.'

'Sorted one thing. The boys plugged the potential leak while I was away. But, apparently,' — and he was careful with his words, Lamord could tell — 'there is a sister and she slipped out of the frame last Friday.'

Lamord knew there was a sister. He didn't know she was at large. 'Fuck, Sean! Where?'

'She jumped the transport at Marmion Street on the way back to the compound and disappeared. Apart from a dozen IAs in the vehicle, there were only the driver and that little weasel Mahmoud that Yusuf keeps hanging around. They didn't stop to look for her — feckin' afraid that if they did, more would escape. Yus-less called me and I sent Swaddick and Dosek round. They've been scouring Fremantle ever since. Dosek was certain he'd found her on Tuesday night, but he was jumped from behind. Some big feller tasered him, he reckons, and then beat the shite out of him, bounced his head off the pavement like it was a goal kick at the World Cup. Says, he didn't get a look at the guy before he passed out. Some other young homeless bloke told Swaddick he'd seen her hangin' round the post office earlier on Tuesday. But no one seems to have seen her since.'

'Well this is a fine thing, Sean.' Lamord's disdain was heavy on the air. Christ, how careful he had been.

8

Acting Detective Sergeant Kelly Boulter has an office about the size of a broom closet located right next to the male toilet on the first floor of the Fremantle detective's building. The building, narrow, two storeys, painted white with no signage, was a relic of the 1960s; its most recent interior fit-out at best twenty years ago. From her desk she can hear the squeak of toilet cubicle doors when they open, bang when they close, every flush, grunt and fart as the other eight detectives in the unit relieve themselves of their bodily waste. If she swivels her chair, she can look through a narrow window that hasn't seen a cleaning rag since last century. The view terminates at a solid red brick wall across a narrow car park, a space with insufficient bays to include her vehicle. Instead, she is forced to park at the nearby multi-storey car park at visitor's rates.

Boulter's posting to Fremantle was in line with a long standing tradition in the WA Police Force, in which the Fremantle District Office is treated as a punishment posting: a stigma which respective commanders and commissioners have worked, over many years, to remove, although their failures remain a mystery to anyone above the rank of superintendent. And while public acknowledgement of the practice may be under the carpet, not a day goes by when Boulter feels as though she is not firmly on the carpet. It's a tough town. Much of the population, particularly when confronted by police inquiry, choose not to speak English, to feign they can't, and then disappear into a melting pot of a cultural quagmire.

Yet the superintendent expects case closures, convictions and reduced crime numbers — the statistics that make his branch look good in the annual report. Statistics that produce promotions. And all too often he gets them from detectives eager for re-posting; detectives who become involved with petty crooks and their victims; detectives who subvert resources of the police services

to cook up charges and false evidence in the pursuit of a better life. Many of Boulter's investigations stall because those involved hail from southern European families who prefer to stay silent behind Napoleon squares of cultural identity, exacting justice privately and physically, where nobody sees or hears anything. Witnesses disappear, victims lose their memories, suspects are never heard from again.

Her posting to the South Metropolitan District Office followed an investigation which threatened allegations of corruption against a senior sergeant who was, at the time, undercover and seconded to the Australian Federal Police. She had been part of a team investigating one crime while an AFP investigation targeted the same group of criminals for a different crime. Hers was drugs; theirs immigration fraud. But they failed to share intelligence. The allegations against the officer went away and Boulter ended up in this foetid old-boys' club, waiting on a long-overdue promotion. To add insult to injury, the senior sergeant she'd had in her sights was promoted to superintendent in the Australian Federal Police.

But there was one man who was the cause of it all. And he, with his ridiculous theories of introspection and its connection to confession and all that theoretical bullshit, miraculously escaped any charges. Although he did connect the dots that led her to the drugs evidence, it was small profit at great expense. Because he blew her cover, her actions were seen to undermine the feds, and that meant Buckley's chance of securing evidence against a crooked copper. Now she's paying the price for it and, if she ever lays eyes on him again, it will be too soon.

She prefers to work in the situation room, a space far more conducive to thinking than the dog box they gave her. Here she can look at the active crime boards — a cork-lined wall pinned with notes, photographs, diagrams

and connecting threads of evidence that provide the narratives of active open investigations. Her ideal time for thinking is late in the day, when she can avoid the sexist slanging from juvenile male officers ten years her senior, who puff their chests and mount their crime scene evidence the way she imagined they mounted the women in their sad little lives.

It was Friday, just gone six-thirty, and before her lay a freshly printed forensics report from the crime scene she'd dubbed the Wheelie Bin Murder. She'd been assigned lead investigator by Superintendent Ewen McPherson for two reasons: officially because she was trained as a major crimes investigator, and — perhaps more to the point — because the victim was of Middle Eastern appearance and consequently of little interest to the media. Truth be told, many would assume — on racial and religious grounds — that whomever the victim was, he deserved it anyway.

On Fridays, the arseholes in the squad disappear quicker than a rainbow in the desert, so the place was deserted except for her and, as it turned out, Superintendent McPherson. She watched him enter the room carrying a bottle of scotch and two glasses, which he placed before him. He chose the head of the table on Boulter's right, his gaze crawling her breasts as he fell into his chair. She shrank back into hers and folded her arms — an involuntary reaction, not to authority but to the residue of an unclean feeling, a response to priggish men who assume a misplaced right to view her body as a public gallery. Why do they do that? Make me feel as though it's my doing? She screwed up her face, a foul taste had found its way into her mouth — reminiscent of a memory twenty-four years old.

'CS report?' McPherson asked as he uncapped the bottle and began

splashing the golden liquor into a glass.

'Not for me, thanks,' Boulter said, holding her hand in a stop gesture. 'Yes. The wheelie bin SOC report.'

McPherson nodded. A Scene of Crime report was the factual record of work the crime scene investigators did immediately they took control of a place of interest. He tempted again with the bottle. 'Sure?' She shook her head and he put it on the table. 'Clear this one, lass, and you can go back to Midland,' he said. And then nodded as an afterthought. 'Permanent promotion.'

He didn't believe it could be done. Obviously. 'I think it's early days, Superintendent. But if you have some insights, I'd be pleased to hear them.'

'Perhaps you think it's early days, lass, but it's been a week and nothing's advanced. That's not early days, that's poor progress. You've had Robinson and Baxter all week. I'll put young Parker with you on Monday as well, help you along, but we need to see some results pretty smartly.' Parker was the latest transferee. He'd been re-posted from the country, Narrogin perhaps, or was it Merredin? she couldn't remember. She wasn't aware of what might have prompted his re-assignment, but her first impression from the Monday briefing suggested he had a whole book of tickets on himself. He'd fit in perfectly with Robinson and Baxter.

'If you think that's a good idea sir,' she said, and turned a page, even though she hadn't read it.

He sipped at his drink and regarded her coolly from beneath his heavy Scots brow.

'Maybe you're the one to ground him a bit,' he said, leaning forward and tapping the document. 'There's not much up on the board, so perhaps you can bring me up to speed?'

He was right, of course, the board was practically bare, the only photographs were of the wheelie bin and the victim, along with a map reference of where it was found. There were no names, no threads connecting events or people.

Boulter pointed to it and then turned the page back on the report. 'We checked the serial number on the bin. It was in pre-delivery at David Grays' O'Connor depot.' She read down the page a bit. 'It was assigned to an address in Armadale … but stolen sometime between last Tuesday morning and Thursday … Tuesday is when it was scheduled for delivery and Thursday is when the deliveries were made. The murder was committed between ten o'clock Thursday night and two the next morning. The only trace evidence on the bin other than the victim's is from the guy who called it in. Robinson and Baxter canvassed the neighbourhood. One odd occurrence — a broken down four-wheel drive near a park around the corner was towed by a towing service around midnight. We haven't identified either vehicle yet — Robbo's following it up. Baxter's on David Grays, trying to pin down the bin theft.

'There are a couple of other odd things. Before it was used, the bin had been cleaned with a chemical agent containing ammonia and sodium hydroxide, and probably with an industrial pressure cleaner. They found some grease in one of the tyre treads and red paint mixed with the victim's blood. The grease may have come from the vehicle that transported it. The paint … I don't know. The analysis says it's automotive — we should get a manufacturer and batch number early in the week.'

'So, professional job?'

'An execution, sir.'

'And the victim, what do we know about him?'

Boulter shook her head and waved in dismissal. She heard her phone ringing in her office; chose to ignore it. 'No idea, sir.'

'Well you'd better get an idea, lass. And soon. It's not the sort of business we want ending up with SCS, is it? That's a black mark on us.' The Special Crime Squad handle cold cases and, should they solve the crime, the original investigation is usually tainted with failure, levelled either at the lead investigating officer or, worse, the branch. He poured another two fingers into his glass and sipped. Voicing his thoughts, he said, 'Surely if he's a foreigner there'd be a record — fingerprints, passport … Shouldn't be too difficult to get Immigration to track it down.'

'Yes, you'd think so, sir. But NAFIS have nothing in the database, nor does NDNA. No DNA record, no prints. It's weird. I'd put him about mid twenties — twenty-five, six … but definitely Arabic features … his clothes were local though, everyday items — jeans, polo shirt, light vinyl jacket, sneakers — things you get from K-Mart or Target. There were no effects, no wallet, no money. Nothing.' She heard her phone ring again in her office, but made no move to answer it and, instead, paused and read quickly through a page, turned it, then turned it back. She looked up at her superior.

'What is it?' he asked.

'*They*, or *he*, strung him up.'

'They what?'

'Hung him by the ankles and butchered him, like my grandfather did with sheep.' She read aloud: 'Contusions and abrasions around the ankles and feet, most likely caused by a chain with links two to two-and-a-half centimetres long looped around both ankles. The body was suspended by the feet. The throat was cut with a fine and very sharp blade. A single cut severed both carotid

arteries and the windpipe just above the larynx. The hands were secured through a belt loop behind the back with a cable tie. The victim bled out completely into the wheelie bin and was then placed in headfirst, his legs folded down and the lid closed. A plastic sheet was used as a liner, like a shower curtain, and folded down on top of the body. The abrasions show some signs of struggle, as does the blood spatter in sections of the plastic liner. Red paint spatter also found on the inside surface of the plastic liner….' Boulter trailed off and looked up from the page. 'Paint? Why paint?'

McPherson drained his glass and stood. 'I guess that's what you need to find out, lass.' He picked up his bottle of scotch and made to leave, abandoning the glasses to the cleaners. He had covered half the length of the table when he turned back toward her. 'Maybe some kind of ritual thing, something … I don't know … poetic justice, perhaps.'

Boulter shot him a look before she could stop herself. Poetic! She sounded it in her head just as her phone rang in her office for the third time. She let it ring.

She slumped back in her chair and tore loose the band that held her hair in a ponytail. Combing her hair back from the top of her head with her fingers, she watched McPherson's back as he left the room. Poetic justice be fucking damned!

When she finally reached her phone, there were three missed calls and corresponding messages on her message bank. All from the same caller. All from a screened number. A number she would much rather have erased from the earth. She was almost tempted to erase the messages without giving them a hearing, but something stopped her. She hit play.

Ah … Kelly … Art Lazaar here — I need to talk to you about something important. Call me back.

She deleted it and played the next.

Yeah, Kelly, Lazaar again. Call me please. It's important.

Another delete.

The next: *Lazaar again … look I've got something important to talk to you about. Maybe we can catch up for a cup of coffee.*

Cup of coffee? That's rich, the last time I saw you, Lazaar, I poured coffee down your trousers. She hit delete with a little more force than was necessary. Then the phone rang. She stared at the instrument while the ring tone warbled at her, one of those factory set tones called *Arctic Air* or some such, until it went silent and the call diverted to the message bank. This message was different.

Boulter, it's me again … I know you're in your office. I need to talk to you about murder. The one you're working on, actually. Tonight. Call me.

She didn't delete the message, but shut the phone off and scanned her surroundings. The only sound was the low hum of the air conditioning and a fluorescent light flickering in a distant office. How could he know? Was he watching? She looked down into the car park, three detectives' vehicles were parked under the glare of halogen lights. The detectives would be at Rosie O'Grady's, the cars would remain late. She saw no one lurking. Perhaps he knew her too well. Even after a year he would assume her working habits remained just that, habits. He was like that: clever, intuitive, deductive. But he was also arrogant and not a little psychopathic in a charming sort of way; a complex man who read people like they were books, whose spheres of influence were both unknown and unfathomable.… Influence! Of course, McPherson. How else?

But McPherson had gone to great lengths to warn her off. Several times

in fact, starting the day she arrived in the post. He could not have been clearer.

'He's put you in a bit of a spot, lass,' he said. 'Compromised your inquiry and landed you in the cack with the brass. Deep shit, some would say. I'd suggest, and suggest it very strongly, that you keep your distance from him. He's an amateur sleuth with an itchy trigger finger and I'll tell you straight, I'll have no truck with his kind in my nick. Mark my words, if it wasn't for him, your sergeant's posting would be permanent.'

She agreed of course. By this stage she'd come to despise the man. Why hasn't he been charged, she'd asked McPherson. Obstruction, interference with an official inquiry?

'Well, that would be difficult to prove,' McPherson said. 'He's a slippery devil with a charmed life. Aye, he knows his way around an inquiry and he's proved useful once or twice, can get into places we can't, do things that we are limited in our powers to do. He unknots. That's his thing. But he's an outsider — he plays close to the edge and when you play with him, you risk falling into the abyss. Best you stay clear of him. He'll not stay charmed forever.'

Could McPherson have been playing her all along? Driving a wedge so she would rise to the challenge? She suddenly felt foolish. The kind of foolish that comes with discovering a lover with another woman and his pants down. Her world had suddenly veered from its usual orbit into the gravitational field of another dimension, and reality had caught up. As the fog cleared it dawned that she had been trapped.

It was she who was the lover with the pants down.

9

Between leaving two of the messages for Kelly Boulter, I meet with Ricard Koffi in my office. It is a scheduled meeting in his Master's program and, when I'm not otherwise distracted, refreshing. Today he wants to talk about issues of plot. He appears a little nervous. Strange.

'The way I see it,' he says, 'Palmer and Frey, they have some differences.'

'Go on.'

'Palmer — he says that a conspiracy is essential — forces join together to do some evil or unlawful business that' — reading from his notes — '*threatens to disrupt the normal state of affairs*.' He looks at me. 'Hooks up with your theory, right? That there are two forces for transformation in the thriller.' He pauses. I must be wearing a blank look. 'You know … you said the villain is agitating to transform society into a model that suits him, right? So he gets certain allies to help, yeah? That's the conspiracy — to change the world according to them. But what they want doesn't suit everyone, yeah? Especially the hero — he's got to work to return the world to order.'

'Okay,' I say.

'Well, Frey doesn't talk about conspiracy. Instead, he says the hero has a mission to foil evil, and suspense is the main ingredient. So, which is it?'

'Can it be both?' He looks blank. I push on, 'Wouldn't the conspiracy create suspense?'

'Not sure it would. For a conspiracy, two people or more agree to commit some act of evil, like, a priest buggers little boys, that's an act of evil; the church covers it up, that's a conspiracy. That alone doesn't make me want to turn the page, right? I mean, that's what suspense is about … getting readers to turn the page, pursuing what happens next? *Intensely dramatic*, as Frey says.'

I take a moment, wondering how I can make what he sees as a substantial dissonance, something that can be married. 'Here's what I think,' I say, shifting forward in my seat. 'Suspense is a reader's experience. Frey is suggesting that the cause of the intensity is twofold: first it's because the stakes are high, and they are high because the reader is already fully aware of the intentions of the villain and the apparent weakness of the hero's position — the reader is fearful that the outcome of the drama will be bad. Your guy witnessed a murder; he thinks they know he saw, he's paranoid and assumes they want to find him and kill him. That would be a bit of a worry, don't you think? The second cause of the intensity lies in the unique nature of the plot. The thriller plot has the reader experience much more of a roller coaster ride because, inevitably, the hero faces impacts of resistance that make resolving the issue imperative, but the odds of doing so grow increasingly difficult. A conspiracy that is made clear to the reader early on makes this challenge seem even bigger. This is where the thriller is different to the mystery.'

'So, in my story, Issa is up against two guys who make a conspiracy to cover their tracks, and that means removing Issa?'

'Assuming they know they were seen and they know it was him. And the conspiracy might even go back to whomever they're working for, so the murder is one thing, but who they do it for … that's something else the reader learns before Issa does. But keep in mind, suspense is not something you do as a writer, it's an experience in the mind of the reader, so you might hold back the reasons behind the murder so you can reveal them later. It's called a retrospective gap. It produces suspense because you control it as an anticipatory flow of necessary information. As you write, you manipulate the difference between the characters

so that a reader is sympathetic to Issa but, at the same time, much more aware of villainous intent than he is.'

'So, you're saying it's about the villains' intentions?'

'That. And your hero foiling them one step at a time. You plant the seed in the reader's mind that the bad guys are up to something so terrible it's going to take a miracle for the hero to survive. And every once in a while you let your hero have a little win — right before you increase the stakes. If you make the villainous intention a conspiracy, then already the odds are against the little guy.'

And then I strike on something I've been playing with for some time.

'But there's something I think both Palmer and Frey overlook in their discussions …'

'Yeah?' He's scribbling furiously now, looking up only long enough to indicate he wants an answer.

'The thriller is predicated on how the villain intends to get away with it. Ask that question at every turn.' I wait while he scribbles. When he looks up, I ask, 'How do your villains intend to get away with it?'

'How do they intend to get away with it?'

'Yes. The plot has to illustrate that intention and, as he is drawn into a state of resentful, mystified opposition to the villains' power, also the actions your solitary hero takes to survive.… You say he can't go to the cops? Why not? And why can't he just up and leave?'

'He's got a wife and daughter, so he can't leave. And he doesn't trust cops.'

I'm thoughtful a moment. 'Not trusting cops — I think that's natural, but I don't think it's enough. He needs a bigger reason.'

He scribbles some more, looks at his watch, which prompts a decision to go. While he's packing I reach for my phone and dial Kelly Boulter's number for the third time. Halfway out the door, he turns and with a grin asks, asks, 'Why don't you trust cops?'

It is after seven-thirty when Kelly Boulter returns my call. She agrees to meet me and nominates a greasy spoon called Angelo's Kitchen right next to a backpacker's hostel on High Street. I arrive early and hide in the shadows of a doorway opposite, a beanie on my head and my coat pulled tight, and watch as she enters the cafe and threads her way through full tables in the front toward the rear. Once I'm sure she is alone, I enter the cafe and slide into the seat opposite her, in the last booth. My surveillance made me five minutes late, another black mark.

'Reliable as ever, Lazaar,' she says, her face passive, giving nothing away. 'I can always rely on you not to show up on time.'

I ask if she would like coffee, head to the counter and order a flat white for her and a long black for me.

'Nice place,' I say, squeaking my way back into the booth and taking in the decor. The booths are cream coloured vinyl, sticky and grimy, the tables white grainy Laminex, chipped and stained and perched on chrome legs bolted to a black and white tiled floor as though a thief might find their allure tempting. Distorted middle-of-the-road pop music from the eighties squawks through speakers in the corner of the ceiling above us. The atmosphere is redolent with stale coffee and frying grease. I'm glad I'd already eaten.

'It's safe,' she says.

'Would you include the food in that?'

'Safe from anyone I know seeing me with you.'

'Ouch.' I wait while the coffees are set before us. The waitress enquires if we are waiting on anything else. We dismiss her with simultaneous shakes of our heads. At least we seem to agree on the food or … something.

I try my best smile on Boulter but it draws no response, so I take a bold step. 'You look good.' And I mean it.

'Thank you,' she says, her words completely devoid of any warmth. 'What do you want to tell me, Lazaar?'

'Well, that — for one thing.…'

She frowns. 'That I look good? Give me a break Lazaar, I know how you think. You should be locked up.' She pauses to ensure I get the point. 'How did you know where I was? Was it McPherson? Was he the one?'

'I don't know a McPherson.'

'Don't bullshit me, Lazaar, if there's one thing I know, it's bullshit. My superintendent, Ewen McPherson…?' She studies my face for signs of recognition. 'He spends the last six months telling me how lucky I was to escape your trap, insisting you're dangerous, unstable, untrustworthy … a deviant I should have nothing to do with. And then he tells you where I am?…'

'Tells me?… I'm sorry, Kelly, I don't know him, he didn't tell me anything. I don't know whose script he's getting his lines from, but I can tell you he's full of shit. Either that or his ear's in the mouth of someone further up the line. Someone who wants to spoil my reputation.'

'Yeah, well you do have a reputation. You're a meddler Lazaar. You stick your beak into business that has nothing to do with you, you interfere, you

put lives at risk, blow investigations.…'

I wait a moment, assume what I hope is a humble attitude and wind my hand as though symbolising a spinning wheel. 'Yeah, yeah, I know, I'm not a cop — I don't enjoy your protection. I've heard it all before; I'll hear it all again, I'm sure.' My gaze bores into her eyes, but the blinds are drawn, her sense of justice deeply buried. 'But I know poetry and something here is not rhyming. And *that* is a worry.'

She emits a brittle little chuckle: involuntary, soulless, unkind. 'Poetry? What the fuck has poetry got to do with it, you wanker?'

'Poetry has everything to do with it.'

'That's why we're here? Together? Talking about a murder? Poetry?…'

'Absolutely.'

'Bullshit.'

'You can't deny the strange attraction between us, we share peculiar etymological energies you and I … a naturally veering path' — bringing my hands together — 'unavoidable.'

'I'm not in the least bit attracted to you. Maybe once, but now you disgust me.'

I hold my hands up in mock surrender. 'Whoa. Whoa! Not attracted to me? Come on Kelly, you know you are. Why would you pick a shit hole like this for us to meet in if you weren't attracted to me? I mean, with a B&B right next door …'

She laughs. 'Jesus, Lazaar, your memory must be as short as your penis — don't you remember what happened to you when we tried that last year?'

I join in the laughter. The ice is broken. 'Of course, we're like Humpty

Dumpty and Alice, we're connected — *pensée pensant*.'

'Sounds like a lot of cock, Lazaar. *Penises and panties?*'

'It's French, it means thought-thinking while thinking-thought … it's that moment when we connect, when things are synchronous, our thoughts arrive in the passion of thinking. I feel you, you feel me.' I take a breath. 'It's like when you're deep in a case and the thought bubble emerges from the froth, the thought itself takes liberties — imaginative and linguistic freedoms, taking chances on rhythms, shaping your line, setting out the beat — suddenly there's a connection. *That's* poetry. And it's what makes you a great cop.'

This last bit comes out as mere flattery, but I actually mean it — she is an excellent detective: thorough, clever, resourceful.

And extraordinarily beautiful.

A little more than a year earlier, she had sauntered into the front bar at the Railway Hotel in North Fremantle dressed in jeans and a black top that didn't just fit perfectly, it re-fit the entire world around her. A longtime regular haunt of stevedores, truckers and miscellaneous wharf workers, the Railway Hotel was seedy and loud, and for many years the only hotel in the Perth metropolitan area to be licenced until 6 a.m. It was owned by Enzo Gordioni, a Fremantle notable. Enzo, the patriarch of the Gordioni family. Enzo, the man who decided whether any man could work the docks; Enzo, who decided whether any man could employ another. Enzo, who would chase Hunter to the end of days.

He chaired committees and held audiences with the Minister for Shipping and Transport, with the heads of Customs and Excise, with the Premier if needs be. He was an honorary member of the Maritime Workers Union and he

extended generous discounts to union members in the hotel's bars. He was 83 years old and ran his interests as though he were fifty. If there was a dispute, and disputes could range from a bar fight to a waterfront lockout, Enzo would be called upon to settle it. He could prevent any goods or people entering or leaving, leverage that tended to resolve most disputes. If it touched the wharf, it touched Enzo. Among the many properties that he owned in Fremantle, the Railway Hotel was the one he'd owned longest. It was dingy, run down and worth a fortune. And when Kelly Boulter walked through the door, it was as though the lights came on for the first time in its hundred and ten year history. I thought she must have been lost.

I was there because Hunter had roped me in to chase a theory. And I like theories. His theory was that the very same Gordioni family who'd, eight years earlier, ordered a hit on him was also behind a surge of meth on the streets, distributed through networks of homeless people sucked in to a secret organisation called *The Brotherhood*. At first it seemed pretty far fetched, but theories often are. It takes a leap across narrative boundaries to make the connection, and, at first glance, his narrative — and that of the usual drug distribution — lacked enjambment. But there were people here who didn't fit; I was warming to the poetry.

An overweight, bearded crane driver, still wearing his hi-vis jacket and quaffing Jack Daniels and Coke like it was cordial, was murdering me at pool. Instead of sighting my shots, my eye had been fixed on a large man at the far end of the bar, his curly hair ginger enough to likely have earned him the nickname Meggs in his youth. It suited me to call him that. He wore an open-necked off-white polo shirt, brown corduroy jacket, blue denim jeans and expensive sneakers.

He was sat at a small round Laminex table in conversation with a skinny young bloke whose deeply olive complexion, long manky hair and high-bridged nose placed his ethnic origins somewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean. Maltese, perhaps. He wore tattered jeans and sweats and looked less than comfortable with his surroundings. Although they were out of earshot, the neural lye between them created a rhythm that sat against the natural meter of the bar. Meggs seemed to be laying down a feel that Skinny would have preferred was played in a different key. At six-thirty on a Friday, they seemed as out of place as she did, perching that cute little package on a bar stool directly in my line of sight. My next shot miscued, giving away two shots, even though Crane Driver only needed the first to take my last fifty bucks.

I declined a rematch on financial grounds and took a stool next to her, scooping my now warm middy of beer into my hands, sipping, scouring the room from beneath a lowered brow. A Bloody Mary was placed in front of her and she too scanned the room, resting her eyes momentarily on mine. Her gaze shot a jolt through me that put my heart into arrhythmia. I tore my eyes away and looked back at the corner table. Meggs had vanished, leaving Skinny sitting alone sipping from a bottle of water and flipping his pack of smokes like they were playing cards. His eyes shifted in fits and starts around the room, as though seeking a familiar figure in the crowd, but not resting on any one long enough to draw a return gaze. Meggs was nowhere in the bar. I watched the toilet door for some time, but he never emerged. Maybe he'd left. I looked at the girl on the bar stool and appraised her assets in brief stanzas. The chorus was in her eyes. Large, clear and the warm grey of a summer dawn. Something to look forward to.

Of course it never dawned on me then that she was an undercover cop.

She looked to be just out for the night, slumming her way around the sleazy end of Fremantle, looking for action. Had she wandered into the wrong bar? Most of my money had gone on the pool tables and the one bloke who had interested me had gone the same way. Although his skinny partner was still on the premises, he was the small cheese in the fridge. Certainly less deserving of my attention than the woman on the stool next to me.

She told me her name was Kylie, 'Like Minogue,' she added in a hyphenated sort of way.

Yeah, I thought, but way more beautiful. And live, right here, in the flesh. She didn't look like her either. This one was shaped and moved with a presence that commanded the space. Her mouth wasn't wide and all toothy: in fact her lips had a certain natural and inviting pout to them that I liked immediately. We entered into a banter of the *getting to know you but I'd really like to do you* kind, volleying back and forth with Wimbledon fervour for some time. Before I knew it, half an hour had gone by, the score was deuce and I was vying desperately for a match point advantage. The crowd had grown steadily larger and more boisterous, and I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Skinny's eyes stopped roving, all of a sudden latching on to something behind me, deeper down the bar. I conceded the point and turned but there was nothing obvious in the crowd. I turned back and readied myself for a fresh serve, but Skinny was on a beeline for the door. I excused myself and threaded through the pack of punters, bursting out the door just in time to see him climb into a Mercedes 380 coupe with an Asian man: perhaps Indonesian or Malaysian. I watched as the car drove down Tydeman Road and disappeared from view. When I turned, Kylie was standing

behind me, watching intently. She suggested we go into the lounge bar where the Dave Hole Band had just started their set. Our match was in recess, it seemed.

A little after two in the morning, we were in a late night yuppie bar on South Terrace where, a week earlier, four off duty cops had beaten the shit out of a mob of exchange students from the USA celebrating the end of their semester at Notre Dame University. The music was loud and awful, and I couldn't wait to get out of there. My intention, of course, was to take her away from this to the sanctity of my bedroom. Although the match was far from decided, I was quietly confident she was folding. It wouldn't be long.

But fortunes in the world of high competition have a way of changing unexpectedly. Within five minutes I'd recognised a guy at the far end of the bar. It was the curly haired guy from the Railway. Meggs. And he was deep in conversation with Vincent Gordioni. Vincent was a nephew of Enzo, and — according to the licence plate above the front door — the owner and licensee of this bar. I grabbed Kylie by the elbow and went to move along the bar, hoping to get a closer look and maybe eavesdrop on their conversation. But there was a sudden change in her demeanour.

Her jaw had set and her eyes narrowed, and she had stiffened a little. I caught the briefest of glimpses in the same direction as Meggs and Vincent so I asked her straight out, having to shout in her ear to be heard, if she knew them.

'I'm much more interested if you know them,' she said.

I admit, that threw me a little. She was too cautious and suddenly standoffish. And it dawned on me that some of her questions earlier in the evening could have had alternative implications. She was fishing. And she was playing a much better game than I realised.

'I know who the young one is,' I said. 'But I don't know Curly there — the bloodnut … Meggs.'

'Who's the young one?'

'You tell me yours and I'll tell you mine.' My lips were on her ear lobe as I said this. She turned and flashed me a smile.

'I bet mine's much more interesting than yours,' she said. Then she reached up closer and her breath fell lightly on the back of my ear and down my neck like a gossamer curtain. It raised more than goosebumps. 'I think we need to get out of here.' She took me by the hand and led me out of the bar.

The slap of the cold air doubled me over and I took refuge in the warmth of the body next to me. It was an awkward moment as we stopped in the shelter of a doorway and I turned her toward me and bent to kiss her. I often marvel at that moment, the moment of 'will she, won't she,' the moment of pre-contact where our lips remain enough apart for there to be space, but sufficiently close for pheromones to launch a rampant boarding party. Brushing without touching; touching without contact — the rhythm of our breathing oddly synchronised; wanting, but desperate for it not to short out. A precipice with a slim distance of desire drawing us together with more force than either of us knew how to resist.

I knew before I took that kiss that the world would become a different place. It was a turning point from which I can never go back. What I didn't know was that I would learn more that night than I bargained for.

I had been living out of a small suite at the Tradewinds Hotel for fifteen months — since my home in Roleystone was burnt to the ground in the most destructive bush fire event in the state's history. An idiot — a cop no less — on a day when

a total fire ban was in place, was cutting steel with an angle grinder among long grass in his back yard. It reached 44 degrees that day, and a howling easterly had been ripping up through the Araluen Valley since before dawn. A spark became an inferno, and by the time the fire was extinguished 72 homes had been razed to the ground. Mine was gone within an hour. And along with it, much of a lifetime of work: works in progress, recorded works, historical memorabilia … stuff I could never replace. Remorseful and regretful though he was, the idiot in this event was saved from the kind of pillory and prosecution visited on mere mortals by no less than the considerable lobbying and council of my good friend, Police Commissioner Nick Fairgough. Institutions have a way of taking care of their own, and I admit, this was one moment when I thought he had taken my advice for poetic licence a bit far.

I ushered the woman whom I no longer believed was really named Kylie-like-Minogue, into the room and set about fixing us a coffee. And, although I had every intention of making love to this woman before the sun came up in a few short hours, I needed some clarity, so I called her on the name thing.

She smiled and ran an index finger down my shirt front, tugging gently at my belt buckle before turning away to sit on the bed. 'You got me. Actually it's Kelly. It's best when you're working off a pseudonym that it's got the same initial letter, and that some of the syllables have close sounds to your real name. It means—'

'Yeah I know, you don't sound awkward when you introduce yourself. You're an undercover cop.' I said it as a statement even though I wasn't sure. Her involuntary blanch confirmed my suspicions. She raised her cup to her lips and shrugged. 'So,' I continued, choosing my path carefully, 'your interest is Meggs

— the bloodnut in the jeans and corduroy coat?'

'I'm not sure that's his name,' she said, 'but no, my interest is you.' And she placed the cup on the bedside table, took my hand and drew me to the bed. 'I think you know enough for now.'

She got off the bed and went into the bathroom. I heard the shower running and a few minutes later she opened the door and stood in the half light like a Muse from Mount Parnassus, holding her hair back from her face with one arm raised and crooked, and her towel puddling around her feet. The light threw a shadow that left one breast mysterious and the other candescent. I watched. And imagined them as peaches cast from the original mould, rising and falling nicely above a stomach that seemed taut with muscle, their dark pink nipples standing erect on the crests of the upper slopes like sentries in a field of rocky aureole. The wild festival of blonde curls crowning the summit of her thighs and legs that curved to rock steady feet below, convinced me that beauty submits its own definition. And I thought that it's often not at all what we think it to be. My heart fishtailed, and my breath rasped like a tortured fan belt as an involuntary utterance escaped my lips.

'Oh God.'

'Goddess, I think.'

Yes. Every bit that, I thought, swallowing the lump in my throat as I curled back the covers in invitation. Her voice had nailed me to her cross.

When she slid into the bed beside me, the touch of her skin brought me to a new height. I wanted to explore. Slowly. Discover every erogenous pore one by one; map the complete geography of this new body; savour the wine of all her sweet secretions.

'You smell like a thousand spices,' I said as I kissed her neck, and drew a deep breath through her hair, the heated air of the bed redolent with the aroma of new sex.

She moaned, and pushed her wet sex against my knee. 'Will you fuck me?'

'Eventually.' I took an ear lobe between my lips. 'First I want to know you.'

I kissed her bottom lip and drew it tenderly into my mouth while the tips of my fingers set out on their own private treasure hunt, charting shorelines I had seen for the first time only moments before but had been growing increasingly aware of all night. I was an artist in a trance of contour. Every skerrick of passion I owned surfaced as I fitted my lips to hers and our tongues engaged, aching from forced restraint.

She was ready and reached for me. As her fingers encircled me, a new and shocking sensation struck my loins. It was like an EMP detonated in the room.

In all my years as a lover, as a connoisseur of beautiful women, as an artist of seduction, I had never experienced the shame and disappointment of being out to lunch at bedtime.

I held her tight and cried.

We never attempted sex again after that night, but we came to a kind of understanding about what we were doing. Her cover was blown — at least as far as I was concerned — so she either had to trust me or call off the operation.

She broke protocol and told me that, a few weeks earlier, a mother had lost her daughter to the Fremantle streets and tipped off Major Crime about a

drug operation being funnelled through the wharf. The mother had blundered into a nest of vipers in an attempt to recover her daughter. But she was too late. The daughter died. Before she did, though, she had given her mother information that might help the police identify a key player. A car accident claimed the mother's life the day after she took the matter to Major Crime. It was not considered a coincidence, and without actually saying as much, Boulter indicated that the guy in the jeans and corduroy jacket — the one I'd nicknamed Meggs — was central to her investigation. So we had a common cause: a Gordioni and the elusive Meggs.

I told her my theories on Gordioni involvement and how, through the outsider's perception, I am drawn to the rhetorical connections that expose corrupt and criminal behaviour in greedy and powerful figures. She was sceptical, because I would not confirm the authority of my poetic licence or how it led to my current theory. Art should not require explanation, I told her. As is the case with most police officers I wind up working with, a distinct sense of professional distance yawed between us. She believed in the straight way, the composed way, the power of formal authority: the heavy weight of law made dead metaphors of theoretical devices, and those who used such techniques were amateurs, their interference bordering on the criminal, to be kept on the margins.

She wanted to identify the figure the girl implicated; a figure she also assumed to be involved in the mother's death. She didn't say, but I knew she had harboured early suspicions about me and earning her trust wasn't easy. I pressed her on the real identity of Meggs, but she remained as tight-lipped about it as I was about Hunter. Some secrets simply can't become other's secrets. That's the way it is.

A month or so after our night of failed congress, Boulter's investigation

took a sudden turn and began spiralling out of control. She veered into quicksand and I could see no way out other than to blow her cover. Of course such sabotage was unethical, but she was far more exposed than she knew and either her superiors weren't aware, or they were willing to hang her out to dry. I wasn't. She accused me of betrayal and vowed that if she ever saw me again she would, in all likelihood, kill me. But then I'd learnt the real identity of Meggs, and I couldn't explain the circumstances to her.

So here we were: one year on.

I lean forward across the table and affect a kind of conspiratorial whisper. 'How's the murder inquiry going?'

'Murder inquiry?'

'Yeah, the Arab kid?'

'Jesus, Lazaar, who the hell told you about that? Was it Baxter or Robinson? Who's got your ear?'

I laugh, no more than a mild chuckle really. 'The trouble with you, Boulter, is you don't know who to trust. Robinson's fat and bent and doesn't give a shit who he stitches up along the way. Remember that young bloke down in Rockingham with the pharmacy job a year or so ago? — you do know he was fucking the kid's wife so he could nail the poor bastard … he's a thug. If they've partnered him with you, it won't be for mentorship — you watch your arse.

'Baxter, I don't know … but the sheer fact that he's stationed here in Fremantle tells us something.'

She sits forward and locks eyes with me. And then comes the scorpion. 'Really? What does being stationed here in Fremantle say about me, Lazaar?'

And it smarts. 'Whatever you think, Kelly, I had to do it. If you had

persisted with that investigation, you'd be dead right now. And, really, that doesn't suit me — I can't have sex with a dead person, it just isn't fun.'

She forces a thin smile. 'You don't give up do you. It's not going to happen no matter how hard you try. You only get one chance and you blew that before you set me up.'

'No. I saved you. Those people have layers upon layers of protection and you got too hot.' I pause and swallow. 'If that's at all possible.'

'That's bullshit. I know Max Glendinning was playing both sides.'

'I don't doubt you're right, but if you had pointed the finger at him, you would have gone the same way as that poor mother.'

'You never told me how you knew.'

Again I find my chuckle. 'I didn't, actually. I was taken by the chemistry, the smell of you, your hair, the way you move — as though you take all the air with you when you leave the room. I … I couldn't resist. Do you have any idea what it's like to want you?… But you played well, so, so well.'

'I should have arrested you then and I should probably arrest you now. So, what do you know about the Arab kid?'

'I know who he is.'

'Well *that's* a bit of a worry, Lazaar, because we can't seem to find one scrap of information that can identify him. So, unless you're somehow up to your neck in this, how could you possibly know who he is?'

'You couldn't find anything to identify him because there is nothing.'

'Doesn't make sense. If there's nothing to identify him, how could you know? Did you kill him?'

'Don't be ridiculous. He left a sister behind, she knows who he is.'

'So she can be identified?'

'No. She can't. She's in danger and needs protection.'

'Then you don't really know if she is actually a sister?'

I stare silently at her. This is her kind of game and I wonder where she'd learnt these skills. 'You could take a blood test, match the DNA … there are ways.'

'Well, yeah I could, Lazaar. You'd better bring her in to the station.'

Obviously that couldn't happen. But I don't want to put Boulter too far offside, so I say, 'Tell me about the murder scene.'

'Can't do that. Against the rules.'

'You'll have to break the rules. This is one of those show me yours and I'll show you mine deals. I can give you the opportunity to get a positive identification, which could very possibly help get you closer to the culprits. But the girl is vulnerable. She needs certain guarantees in place, and if you can't provide them, I walk.'

'I'll arrest you.'

'On what grounds?'

'Obstruction.'

'You'd never make a case.'

'Make you pretty uncomfortable.' She is right of course, but I'm not about to give her that.

'Not nearly as uncomfortable as you will be with a wrongful arrest charge over your head … I'd have thought you'd want to solve this one, reinstate your good standing and all that.'

'A good standing you fucked up, Lazaar. You and your bullshit theories.'

We sit, each glaring at the other in silence. Eventually her eyes soften and her lips almost make it to a smile.

'If McPherson hears of this,' she says, leaning across the table toward me, 'It'll be the end of me.'

'Yeah, well that cuts both ways. No one in your team, and I mean no one, can know anything about what I tell you. I'm afraid, after the Glendinning business last year, we don't know who can be trusted.'

'You know he's a superintendent in the AFP now.'

'Who?'

'Glendinning. McPherson told me that if the coalition win this election, he's set for a top job in their new border force.'

'Jesus! Well that seals it then. This is between us. Agreed?'

She agrees and proceeds to give me a summary of the crime scene. It is a grisly rendition that confirms the essence of the version I got from Hunter and fills in some gaps that neither he nor the girl could. I work it over in my mind, trying to figure out what she is withholding.

'A wheelie bin?' I ask at length, somewhat askance.

She nods.

'And there's nothing on it?'

'Other than the victim and his blood and fluids in a plastic liner, nothing. There was a little bit of what appears to be engine grease in one of the tyre treads. Apart from that, sparkling clean.'

'Weapon?'

'Very sharp, thin, one-fifty to two hundred mil blade. Perhaps a butcher's boning knife or something similar.'

I give a low whistle. 'Not what you might consider your run of the mill murder. Calculated, clean. No passion. Definitely a worry.'

'So,' she says, smiling for the first time, 'what do you call poetry without

passion?'

I laugh. 'Haiku.'

'Okay, your turn,' she says, laying her arms flat on the table before her.

I give her a brief run down of the brother-sister story and how they came to be in community detention and under contract for the passage of their mother and siblings out of Indonesia to Australia. I draw the line at naming Falullah or Yusuf. Nor do I elaborate on the thugs searching for her.

'There are a number of worries here,' I say as I wrap it up. 'One is why you could find no record of this young man. His details should be on file in Immigration.' She nods. 'The girl has no identity information either. Apparently, the person who kept them in detention took all their papers to prevent them absconding. I need a legend for her so I can get her into a safe environment. I need you to make that happen.'

'Fuck, Lazaar. I can't do that.… Jesus! I'd be putting everything at risk.'

'Everything? You're not putting your life at risk — she is.'

'Yeah, but …'

'No buts Kelly. Get her an identity so I can get her to safety. And there's another thing …'

'What?'

'These are some serious fuckers. They bring asylum seekers in and enslave them, and for my money, they have real clout and getting anywhere near them will be nigh on impossible. You can't let anyone know you're looking further than the murder … can't raise any red flags. The last person we need sniffing around this is—'

'Glendinning.'

'Exactly.'

10

Saturday 10 August — 28 days before the election

'You need to fix this, Sean. I'm supposed to be out at the vineyard this weekend, not here. I've had to postpone an important meeting with Carter's campaign team because some idiot showed some girl a picture of her butchered brother.' Lamord paused a moment to let the gravity of the situation sink in. Then he said, 'How the fuck did he get hold of a picture, Sean?'

'Swaddick took the picture on a throw-away camera to show Yusuf that the job was done. It should have been destroyed. But, either Use-less left it lying around or — and I think this is the more likely — he kept it to show anyone who thought of stepping out of line what could happen to them. It was that fool Mahmoud who showed it to the girl. Maybe he's sweet on her; wanted to impress her.'

'Should never have happened. Where is it now?'

'I've got it, I'm going to destroy it later today.'

An idea began to form in Lamord's mind. 'No, give it to me. I'll deal with it.'

Dower rose from his chair. 'It's in my car.'

Lamord held his hand up to stop him leaving as the phone on his desk buzzed. He picked it up and listened, acknowledged the call, then replaced the receiver.

'Get it and meet me in the bunker,' he ordered, 'Codlin's got something to show us.'

As the door closed behind Dower, Roger Lamord dialled a number on his phone. He didn't identify either himself or the person who answered at the other end. There was no need. He simply asked, 'Are you free for lunch?' — paused while he listened to the response — 'Yeah, Balsamic and Olive's — one o'clock.

There's something I need you to look into.' He replaced the receiver, stood up and headed for the stairs.

The bunker is Sam Codlin's domain: a secure room similar in both dimension and encasement as a pair of shipping containers face-to-face. It is located in a secure section at the back of the building on the first floor. The only means of access is through a biometric security lock. An array of military grade surveillance and media equipment spread along one wall and across one end. Half a dozen workstations attended to a maze of screens and audio equipment, several alive with video images and the buzz of live and recorded audio streams. Codlin's office was a glassed-off affair from which she could survey the entire operation; beyond it, an isolated server-room housed racks of high-end computer servers in a controlled atmosphere.

The walls and ceiling were black, ceiling lights pinpointed work areas to create an ergonomic visual environment for people whose work entailed long periods of concentration on monitor screens and intense audio traffic. A number of chairs and small work-tables sat on a raised viewing platform behind the workstations.

When Lamord entered, Codlin was at a workstation second from the far end. A young man with shoulder-length hair and mousy features sat before a pair of giant plasma screens. He was known as The Rat. At twenty-three he was a communications technology genius — one of half a dozen such specialists Codlin had on her team, each with equally improbable names.

Codlin looked up as Lamord entered the room. She smiled at him.

'Sean's on his way up,' he said, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder.

'Had to get something from his car.' He approached the workstation and looked at the image in freeze-frame on one of the giant screens. 'What have we got?'

'This is a feed from the City of Fremantle looking at the post office in Market Street. The camera is located on the parapet of the building opposite. The monitor on your left is footage from last Tuesday.'

Lamord looked at the time stamp on the screen's bottom right.

20130806:08:53:00.

A buzzer sounded and Codlin studied a small monitor in the corner of her office. Dower's face filled it. She clicked a button on a remote that dangled from a lanyard around her neck. The door opened and Dower walked in. Codlin continued.

'The screen on the right shows a feed, synchronised to the same time from a second camera on the corner of High Street. These are the only two cameras in that vicinity, so the picture isn't complete, but we've managed to locate your girl, and piece together some of her movements that morning.'

Lamord drew up a chair and sat at one of the small work desks, his Mont Blanc in hand and a notebook on the table. Dower sat next to him. The Rat took over the narrative.

'You can see the time is eight-fifty-three,' he said. His nasal voice carried an edge of disdain that Lamord assured himself was a cultural artefact and not intentional disrespect for the technologically inferior. The drone continued, 'Working backwards from here, we can set the situation.' A red dot appeared on the screen at the post office. 'If you look in the shadows here, you can just make out her face …'

Lamord looked closely and saw a shape cloaked in shadow, a cloth of

some sort covering her head and her face just visible in the light.

'If we backtrack to just after eight o'clock …' As he spoke, vertical streaks appeared across the screen as people walked backwards at a brisk and unnatural pace. 'Here it is two minutes past eight and right here we see her, strangely hidden behind these two men as she hugs closely to the wall and slips into the alcove where the post boxes are. Then, a minute later she takes up her position behind this arch and fixes her gaze on something across the street.

'I'll come back to that … but if you watch this other screen, the one with the feed from the High Street corner' — Lamord shifted his attention to the other large screen — 'we see her at seven-fifty-eight approach from the university end of High Street, still seeming to keep in the shadows and she waits two minutes near the scaffold on the Federation Hotel site … and I want you to watch this closely' — he slowed the vision — 'she's looking at something or someone coming down from the direction of South Terrace on the opposite side, see her head turn … she watches someone walk by. And when that person is past, she waits … then ducks in behind these two men in business suits — I'd say, if the person she's watching turned, she would be hidden from view. She disappears out of the frame of this camera and a few seconds later appears in the other one here.' They all turned their attention to the first monitor.

'Curious,' Sean Dower said. 'Is there vision from the other side of the street?'

'Unfortunately, no,' Codlin cut in. 'These cameras are new in this part of town — they've only got these two, so we're pretty limited in what we can see.'

'Okay, what else?' Lamord asked.

'She stayed in that same location until almost eleven,' the Rat intoned, as

he shunted the footage forward to 10:52 and hit play. They all watched intently as the girl disappeared from the alcove.

'Wait!' Dower commanded. 'Where did she go?'

The Rat reversed the footage and once more took up the commentary as he replayed it. 'She's looking across the street here, but her expression has changed. Then, notice, she looks toward Cantonment Street, and then down toward the train station and again across the street. If I had to guess, I'd say she's lost her mark.'

'Yeah, but where does *she* go?' Dower asked again.

'Into the post office … see this crowd of Asian tourists?… she's hiding among them, heading off in the direction of the train station.'

Lamord scribbled a note. 'Does she catch a train?'

'I don't know,' the Rat replied. 'I've scanned TransPerth footage from that time and I can't see her, but that doesn't mean she didn't.'

Dower whistled beneath his breath. 'Girl doesn't want to be found.'

'So it seems,' Codlin said, 'but we're not done yet.'

The Rat again took up the narrative. 'If you look at these two screens here' — pointing at two smaller screens beneath the two large ones — 'this is real time. The left one is the same camera looking at the post office—'

'Dosek is standing there where the girl was,' Codlin interjected, pointing at the form in the shadows.

'Yes, I see him,' Lamord said.

'And we've got a camera feeding this screen on the right, looking directly across the street from Dosek's position.' The Rat was back online. 'This is an approximation of what the girl might have been looking at.' He tapped with a

stylus at the tablet on his desk and the image reappeared on the larger screen above.

Lamord studied it. He was looking at the footpath opposite, the right edge of the frame showed a covered lane at the rear of the Wesley Church, the left third a series of reflective glass shop fronts. A steady stream of Saturday morning pedestrians passed through the frame.

Codlin picked up a mobile phone and dialled a number. As she did so, she explained to Lamord what was happening. 'I think the lane opposite was what she was looking at. When you compare images of where her eyes appear to be looking and what Dosek sees when we have him look in the same direction, we think something was happening in that lane.' She spoke to the console. 'Swaddick? What have you found out?'

Swaddick's gravelly voice sounded from the audio monitors. 'There's a bloke busks here several mornings a week. Reads poetry, apparently. A guy in the internet cafe just down the street reckons he's been doing it for yonks. Says they call him Hunter. Big lumbering bloke, long beard, grey, scruffy looking, about sixty, limps and carries a briefcase. I reckon I saw him on Tuesday night outside a chemist's. Same bloke.'

'Is he the bloke who clobbered Dosek?' Dower asked.

'Can't say,' Swaddick replied. 'Could be.'

'Think you can track him down?' Lamord asked.

Swaddick's reply was professional enough to send a cold shiver down Lamord's spine. 'Shouldn't be much of a problem. We'll scour the place until we do — find out if he knows anything.'

'Good. Thanks,' Lamord said, and nodded to Codlin to kill the call. He

turned to Dower. 'You get down there with them and stay on it, Sean. Call me, I don't care what time, you call me when you find this guy. Find the girl. Okay? I want a lid put on this thing. Loose ends cost, and it's not a price you will want to pay.' A chill settled in the room.

Dower got up to leave. 'Sure, no problem, Roj. We'll find him, and if he knows where she is, he'll tell us. I promise you that.'

After the door closed, Lamord turned to Codlin. 'Good work Sam, you too, Rat,' he said, and left the room.

Balsamic & Olive's was written up in the previous month's Scoop Magazine as the most important new dining experience on the west coast. The reviewer described it as the first restaurant that had ever authentically brought the world to Australia. What Delmonico's did for Italian food in New York, the article read, Balsamic & Olive's will do for world food in Australia.

The main image of the spread featured a beautifully framed photograph of Roger Lamord wearing jeans, a white open-necked shirt and a jacket in warm grey with minute checks that perfectly offset the tempered grey of his hair. He was seated. His Chef de Cuisine, Alain Forstenheymer, stood behind and a little left of him, resplendent in tunic, and hat in hand. Three of the five Head Chefs were posed seated at an adjacent table, with the remaining two standing behind, nearing the extremity of the lens's depth of field. On the right of the frame and forward of the feature tableau stood the restaurant's Maitre de Cuisine, Jonathon Suter. The photographer had artfully captured the sense of substantial acreage between tables, the opulent simplicity of the decor that spoke simultaneously to the revolutionary menu and the salivancy of the diner before they were even

seated.

And the ethnic mastery evident in the talent.

Balsamic & Olive's was Lamord's pride and joy. It had celebrated its opening three months earlier with a Liberal Party fundraiser, attended by the financial luminaries and industrial heavyweights of the state, LOTO present as guest of honour, a seat at his table fetching $25,000 for the coffers, the state Premier his host. No expense was spared. Michael Bublé was brought in as the main event and all six chefs demonstrated what the casual diners among the Western suburban elite could look forward to in the menu — *culina mundi* — food from all corners of the world, presented as though the diner were in those corners.

The restaurant occupies two floors, the kitchens one floor below, and the riverfront forecourt of a five storey exclusive boutique hotel at the western edge of Northshore, a north bank enclave between the two bridges that cross the Swan River at Fremantle. The real estate prices begin with telephone numbers and the lifestyle is designed to infuse a sense of the Mediterranean more usually associated with Monte Carlo.

Lamord parked in the basement car park, but instead of taking the lift or internal stairs to the ground floor, he walked out of the car park around to the river side and up the steps to the forecourt, entering the restaurant through double glass doors. Max Glendinning sat in the reception lounge nursing a scotch and soda. He rose as Lamord entered and came toward him. Jonathon Suter waited at a discreet distance while the two men shook hands and greeted each other. Then he led them up the stairs to a private table at a window that overlooked the river and its steady stream of leisure craft taking advantage of

the rare moment of beautiful August sunshine. Although several tables on the floor were occupied, they were, in all senses, alone.

Three waiters were in attendance. A swarthy young man of southern Mediterranean complexion introduced himself as Alessandro and explained that the lunch menu was a choice of Tunisian, Caribbean or Baltic. The choice a diner makes at Balsamic & Olive's is not reduced to individual dishes, it is simply a geographic gastronomy. A menu describing each meal was offered, but Lamord dispensed with it and instructed Alessandro that they would be dining Tunisian.

He could see Glendinning squirm with unfamiliarity. 'Brik with egg and tuna,' he explained. 'Hand crafted from semolina flour, turned and filled with capers and creamy egg and spiced with a unique mix of coriander and chili. Bernard is brilliant, you'll love his fish Chamoula — it's a speciality from Sfax on the eastern coast,' — he gestured the wonder of what to expect with his hands as Glendinning visibly paled — 'a steak of grouper cooked slowly and bathed in a thick sauce of glazed onion and raisins and spices.'

Another waiter, an older man with a thick grey moustache, bright blue eyes and an eastern Mediterranean accent approached with two small glasses and poured a shot of thick dark liquid from a green, long-necked bottle into each.

'T'ibarine,' he announced, 'a digestif from dates, 'erbs and grasses from Thibar, the valley of the Sun Kings in central Tunisia. 'Tis perfect to prepare the palate for the brik' — he kissed the tips of his fingers — 'And after the brik, I will serve you a glass of the Distincto Magnifique Blanco, a dry muscat from the Mornag full of tropical and sweet fruits … the aroma so perfect the Chamoula will taste like 'eaven. And to drink with the Chamoula we 'ave an oh-nine Selian Reserve; dark ruby red, full and complex aroma with notes of caramel and black

currants … it complements perfectly the raisins in the Chamoula sauce. And for dessert, vin de Paille — the flavours of apricot and peach in sweet syrup. And with your coffee, sirs … the unique rich flavour of the boukha, 'tis perfect, non? A smooth fig brandy to complete the Tunisian experience.'

He finished with a flourish and a broad smile as Max Glendinning raised his glass and applied his nose to it tentatively. The medicinal pungency caused a reflex reaction that screwed his face up into deep lines, and he plonked the glass back on the table. The waiter laughed, gestured to Lamord and walked away.

'Jesus, Roger, where the fuck did you get him from?' Glendinning was still reeling from the assault on his olfactory nerves.

'That's Milorad. He's from Bosnia. He's worked in restaurants and wineries all along the Baltic and Mediterranean for years — one of the best vintners alive. I guarantee he will not serve you anything he has not tasted and he finds exactly the right taste for the moment. Trust him, Max, he's worth every word.'

'That's all well and good, but how is he with beer?'

Lamord laughed. 'You're a fuckin' Philistine. Sip the Thibarine. Once you get that first taste in your mouth, you won't even remember how beer tastes. And I promise you, when you taste the brik, you will think you're in a Star Wars movie. It's that good.'

And with this last word, Lamord raised his glass and sipped. As the liquor hit the back of his palate it released its fire, clearing his upper airways and tracking its warmth down his gullet to settle like a hot coal in his belly. Perfect. He took a second sip and leaned forward to discuss the business he had in mind.

11

Sunday, 11 August — 27 days before the election

'Sounds like they're pushing you out, Art.' I'm sitting with a fellow creative writing teacher from a different university over a Cicerellos' Fish and Chips lunch on the jetty at Fremantle's fishing boat harbour.

'The death of creative writing as we know it,' I say. 'Gardner called me on Friday to ask if I'd thought any more about it. I don't think she wants me to leave, but I don't think she wants creative writing either. They want the academy separated by some recognisable industrial units — a real worry, but I can see how it makes sense to them.'

'How so?'

'Well if future performance measures are going to be anything like what this opposition's proposing to bring in should they win power, universities are going to get funding based on the success of graduating students finding employment. That, and capacity to attract overseas students. The first makes the possibility of offloading HECS loans to the private sector more attractive, and the second just makes money with less academic accountability.'

'They're doing this everywhere, you know, they gutted the Arts faculty at my university too.'

'Maybe the powers that be know something we don't. It's fucked up though. It seems like a cultural studies model of English where everything serves the market. A text exists for the purpose of capitalising. The making of a text, though, is irrelevant. Creative writing has nothing to do with *creative* under that. I agree with Morley — creative writing needs to divorce English. And it needs more emphasis on the creative aspect — if they want an educational model that serves the future, they need to be thinking about how creative writing teaches creativity.'

My colleague takes a long pull at his beer, fists a stack of chips into his mouth and chews thoughtfully. 'Hmm. Dunno, Art. I have a different opinion about the desirable relationship between English and creative writing. Surely, literary study — wide and deep reading — is the main tool here. We've already got too many young would-be writers who simply haven't read enough to understand that their main challenge is not to express themselves but to master the medium of written language.'

'What do you mean by medium?'

'Wherever we find written language that communicates ideas.'

'What about where we find no language, and engage writing to inscribe an idea? Look, reading is important I grant you that — it's an excellent way to improve writing — but reading's relationship with writing is not a Derridean opposition, as the academy seems to think it is. It's not a more authentic use of the imagination than writing, it's a different one. And based on a different epistemology to boot. The problem I have with the literary studies model is that it locks us into what we already have. The text exists and our job is to find the meaning within using the tools of analysis and criticism and particular theoretical frames. I don't argue that one can't write by being informed by that.

'But *creative* means bringing something into being that hitherto exists only in the form of ideas, writing is a way of inscribing that, making the thinking — the thought that is the idea — comprehensible. Mastering the medium of written language is more akin to making the thoughts of others comprehensible, in which case, for sure, we are locked into English. But if we take the view that first and foremost we are working with ideas to bring them into being, then we can be working in any language, exploring every discipline. Moreover, the mastery

of the language comes with the exploration and experience of creative practice, but you can't say that creative practice comes from mastery of language. It's not about being the next best novelist or poet, even if that's where it might lead a student, it's about understanding ways of using imaginative tools to produce an effect wanted by that imagination. The written language is one of those tools.'

'Okay … but you can see the bigger problem can't you?'

'What that there's no industry model to support it?'

He laughs loudly, as though I made a joke when I was being completely serious. 'No Art. How the fuck are you going to assess it? It's all very well to say you want to teach students to work with ideas, to find them, manipulate them, bring them into being, to make thinking comprehensible … I can see the value in that, what I can't see is how you assess it so that the university produces a graduate who knows where they're getting their job from. You know, we deal in teachers and nurses and doctors and engineers, and they all know where their work is. And if our creative writing is grounded in the literary model, at least we have a world body of precedence against which we can judge their performance as writers. We can compare their control of language, their voice, their point of view—'

'Exactly! Compare! Especially compare it to what already exists, and more importantly what the examiner is already overly familiar with. And the closer it comes to an equitable comparison, the higher the grade. It's bullshit!' In the end though, I recognise there is a real problem here. I drain my beer and stare into the clouds that are absent from the bottom of the bottle. 'Ah, maybe you're right,' I say at length. 'Maybe I'd better get used to the idea of being homeless. Me and my discipline.'

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12

It wasn't Lavender Jensen's first time at St Patricks, she'd been there twice before, conducting interviews with elderly homeless people in an effort to understand why. She was on time, but Hunter wasn't waiting where she expected him to be.

Interview three before you get to me, his note had instructed. The note she had dug out of the base of a parking ticket machine in the Parry Street car park and subsequently thrown into a bin along the way. The note she knew was there because a strip of masking tape stuck in what appeared to be a random fashion to the lower part of the machine told her it was there. A second strip crossing the first would have been a sign to abort the meeting. Hunter had instructed her in the tradecraft in the early hours of the previous Saturday morning when she had come to spirit Falullah away to her apartment in Applecross, where she'd remained in hiding ever since.

She worked her way down the room and introduced herself to an older woman who was finishing her meal with a cup of tea. Lavender explained that she was from the university and asked the lady if she would speak about her circumstances. The woman agreed. Not all do. Sometimes she is told to fuck off, precisely what the next person told her when she approached him about ten minutes later.

He appeared to be about fifty. On reflection, he didn't look all that disadvantaged; his clothes were well cut and had the appearance of a styled shabbiness. He was toying with food rather than eating it. And when she approached him, he lashed out in a broad brogue.

'Not feckin' interested in your shite research, girly.' It didn't surprise her particularly, but something about the undertone put her on edge.

The old fellow at the next table welcomed her. He brightened visibly

on her arrival, told her his luck must be running and joked with her while she engaged him in a discussion about why he was homeless. He told her his name was Clifford. He'd been a corporate manager, high earning and hard working, but his company went broke and he'd lost all he had. The shame of it drove him to hide it from his family, and he drank, until one day he realised they were no longer there. The only thing left was the street.

Hunter lumbered in from the front door while she was engaged with Clifford. She followed his approach with her eyes without raising her head, noticing that she wasn't the only one. Past Clifford she could see the Irishman showing what seemed to be more than a casual interest as Hunter dragged a chair out, sat heavily, and drew a tattered notebook from a briefcase that he shoved under his chair with his foot. He opened the notebook with one hand while a pen magically appeared in the other and spent the next few minutes scribbling rapidly across the pages.

By the time she approached he was well into a meal of roast lamb and vegetables, with a mug of tea. He looked up at her with a blank expression.

'Can I ask you some questions about your circumstances?' she asked, hoping a measure of earnest sympathy was evident.

'I write about my circumstances,' he replied, forking a piece of lamb into his mouth.

'In your books?' Lavender asked, as if there were another place of record available.

'Yes. In a written language. Shorthand.'

She'd heard of it, but never seen it. 'Will anyone ever read them?'

'Of course not. Why would I write something for others to read?' He

stared into her eyes as though to get a measure of how she might respond, shovelled up a load of lamb and vegies and then, suddenly, he stood and pushed a chair out for her. 'You've got ten minutes, then I'm gonna piss off and find a high cliff above the sea and throw myself off. You can write that if you like.'

'That's lovely, thanks.' She waited for him to sit again before continuing. Then she said, keeping her voice low enough to skate just across the surface of the room's susurrus, organising her research materials in front of her, 'Why all the cloak and dagger, Hunter?'

A young volunteer topped up Hunter's tea from a large urn on a trolley, and poured one for Lavender. When they were alone again, he spoke in low tones.

'We can't be connected, can't be seen to know each other — you gonna write this down?'

She looked at him, knowing there was more, waiting on him, allowing a reproachful scowl to spider across her forehead, daring him to state the obvious. Which he did.

'You're supposed to be interviewing me for your research — at least look as though you're doing it.'

Lavender refused to glance at her question sheet, taking an attitude to make her feelings felt. 'Why am I here? Do you want to know how Falu—'

'Hey!' His sharp rebuke caught her by surprise. 'No names.'

'Uh … of course. Sorry.' She smiled, taking a moment to rein in her feelings. Her eyes, tinted in the hues of the flower after which she'd been named, glistened behind a pair of lenses set in dark blue frames. 'I didn't know an interest in elder homelessness would get me into the spy business.'

'Can't be too careful,' he rejoined with alacrity. 'Tell me about your research.'

'The causes of elder homelessness? For most I've spoken to it's not just lack of access to shelter — it's more like disadvantage snowballing out of control, and a sort of fraying of social resources. People lose their connections, their personal economy disintegrates, the issues pile up and bury whatever the real thing was that started it.' She took a breath, and saw his interest was piqued. 'This society has built a wall, not to keep people in or out, but to dislocate our ability to talk about what fails us. It's as though, if we have any success at all, we have to be superhuman, yet failure relegates us to the subhuman. If you're not successful, you're a failure so I don't know where the middle is; where humanity is. I mean,' — she cast her arm around, indicating that a point of principle was involved — 'this is failure on a grand scale because most people here don't know what to talk about so they end up talking about the wrong things — if they talk at all. It's like trying to have a conversation with Donald Duck, and because no-one understands it, it leads to governments and do-gooders trying to solve the wrong problems.' She looked him in the eye and asked, in the tone of a person choosing fruit, 'What's your story?'

Hunter returned her stare for a long moment and then shook his head. He said nothing and looked past her. She didn't need to follow his eyes, she could sense he didn't want to disappoint her, but there was nothing he could tell her. Yet he could fill her book. Everyone in this room has their own reason for being here. The ghosts were many, the demons even more abundant, no one leaves with the keys to the kingdom. It's where misery partners with loneliness and turns to despair for company. A life created by secrets, bred by secrets, sanctified

by secrets. Secrets within secrets. Secretarial secrets in hallowed halls. The *poetic coincidence*, Art Lazaar called it.

At length he turned back to her and countered, as if he felt it best she let it go. 'You might be better off worrying about your own generation.'

'I think there are plenty of people worrying about my generation. I'm more concerned with why someone like you ends up on the streets — eating in a soup kitchen.'

'Some of the best meals I've had in my life, I've had right here.'

'And that's the reason? The food?'

'If I told you the real reason, it could cost us both our lives. It's not because of any snowballs though, I can at least tell you that — you don't get them in hell. You want to do something real with your research?' She nodded, anticipating a pearl of wisdom about to shuck its own shell. 'Get people talking about asylum.'

'Asylum?' That was out of left field. Somehow the dots must connect, but she didn't see it. She felt him watching her struggle — he's enjoying this.

Then his eyes popped forward in their sockets and he zeroed in on Lavender's, boring straight through them, deep into her mind.

'You're right, it's not about loss of shelter; loss of shelter is no more than a symptom of a much nastier disease. Everyone here is on the run, hiding from persecution, from violence, from bigotry, from political marginalisation … a homeless person is not just left out in the cold, they're running away from what they can't go back to.' His voice cracked momentarily, she thought his eyes moistened. Then a sudden change of subject. 'Did you talk to that smug-looking prick over there?'

He held her eyes, a sign not to look. 'Told me to fuck off. Doesn't look homeless to me … but he does seem interested in you.'

'He's been sniffing around for a few days. Looks like he wants to make a move.'

Thought lines above the bridge of Lavender Jensen's nose fanned out into a little frown — a sign her curiosity was aroused. The deeper they go and the farther they spread, the greater her interest. She didn't have to say anything. Hunter picked it up straight away.

'Some of us are lost,' he said, his voice low and earnest, 'and don't want to be found, and others have found what they don't want to lose. But that guy — he's looking for what he's lost. Understand?' She nodded. 'His name's Sean Dower, runs a large, highly profitable security concern. It's owned by Roger Lamord. Heard of him?'

'Lamord? Don't think so.'

'It's funny. Well known among a select few, hardly known among the masses. Not sure how perhaps the richest guy in the state — owns a whole bunch of concerns — can actually do that. His sort assumes everyone is for sale, but will only buy through a dealer, so they never have to touch the merchandise.' Hunter directed a quick gaze at the nearby table and dropped his voice even further. 'This guy, though, now he's a really nasty piece of work. He wants to get his hands on our guest. So, what I want to know is, what's the connection? What would Roger Lamord, king maker, buyer of men, want with a young girl? Understand?' She nodded, made a note on her page. He continued, more animated, more effusive.

'Politicians, priests, academics … you know they all still think asylum

is that building on the other side of the park. They can't imagine — sitting in their safe little worlds with their safe little salaries and safe suburban addresses — they can't imagine what it's like to be driven away, tossed out, talked about as the product of a sick society they refuse to admit being part of. They sit back and watch the news on their big screen TVs: child molesters, domestic violence, psychopathic workplace abuse, wars on drugs, on terror, on gang violence … and while they're watching they hope beyond all hope that they never have to confront it. And you know why?… Because they know that if they stopped for one moment to think on it, they'd see they're equally guilty of the same violence. No wonder this country treats asylum seekers like shit, it's part of our DNA.'

Lavender thought about that for a moment. 'But homelessness and asylum seekers — it's a bit much to wrap them in the same package isn't it?'

'You think so? What was it you said earlier: snowballing disadvantage, fraying social connections? It's the same cause. Look, if the state doesn't want homeless people on its streets, it shouldn't support the violence that causes it. Greedy corporations, abusive institutions, land grabbing, unfair gender laws, inability to police domestic violence … it's the same for asylum seekers, just on a different scale. If we're going to fight wars in other people's countries, we could at least make sure the refugees we create doing it have somewhere safe to go and a safe means of getting there. Sending in soldiers and guns might settle the matter for the moment, but the job's not finished when all you've done is divide the goodies from the baddies and left a smouldering ruin in your wake. Really, how different is that from domestic violence?

'And don't get me started on the language they use. We live in a society that has mastered the art of honing contradictions to such a fine point that you

can peel paint with it. This election will be decided on asylum seekers, make no mistake. Both sides will play to the entrenched rednecked xenophobia that makes up the most part of this country. Sure, it's hidden because no one wants to air their views and be ridiculed, but they will trot out their absurd ideas branding anyone arriving here on a boat illegal and criminal — and we have every reason to suspect they are a terrorist. We don't want Muslims, we don't want dark skinned people from other lands. Shit — we don't even want our own dark skinned people!' Hunter took a breath and shook his head, and then continued. 'It's not the kind of Australia I like living in, and it's not the kind of Australia my grandparents paid taxes to build.'

She put her pen down and smiled at him. 'So, where does that leave us now?'

'I'd say you've had your ten minute's worth.' He stood suddenly, leaned down in front of her and said, in a low voice, 'There's a key stuck to a swab of chewing gum beneath this table. It's to a storage unit where sheep shop, top deck, numbers on it … understand?' She nodded. 'It's for Lazaar. Close your book …'

She closed her notebook and Hunter continued.

'You need to drop your pen on the floor, scramble around to retrieve it, bang your head on the table when you do — hard! Got it?' She nodded. 'Tell Lazaar the confederates are combobulating — exact words, got it?' She nodded. 'We won't meet again.'

He pulled his coat tight around him, lifted his collar and, as he bent to retrieve his briefcase left her with final instructions. 'Do more interviews before you leave. Bo Peep over there will follow me, you can count on it. But under no

circumstances are you to follow him. You burn his face into your memory and if you ever see him sniffing around — ever — tell Lazaar, and fucken' hide. Above all, keep our package safe.'

He tucked his briefcase under his arm and lumbered off, just as her pen clattered to the floor.

Instead of heading toward the door, Hunter walked in the direction of the kitchen. He slipped through a door on the right which took him into an ante-room. Several doors led off the room and through one of them the bustle and hum of the kitchen could be heard as returning crockery was scoured and stacked and new plates set forth with a clatter of cutlery and production orders barked out at a furious pace. Against the western wall, a roped off balustrade surrounded a set of stairs that descended through the floor. Hunter straddled the rope and dropped down the stairs two steps at a time. At the bottom, he unlocked a door with an old Bradley key, went through it and relocked it from the other side. He was in a small limestone cellar that had been hollowed out when the building was constructed in the late eighteen hundreds. Back then, it was a simple hostel for seafarers.

At the far end of the cellar, another door let him into a tunnel once used to facilitate the transfer of goods from docked ships at the wharf, but now terminating just before Beach Street. The alley he emerged into ran alongside the building he'd just left, connecting Beach Street to Queen Victoria Street. He kept to the shadows, moving quickly, exiting into Beach, where he turned left in the direction of the train station.

He hadn't gone fifty metres when his passage was blocked by four

younger men. The mouthpiece he recognised as a member of *The Brotherhood*, a vicious gang of dope dealers and thugs who coerced the younger and vulnerable of the street to join their fray. Hunter had seen the guy around, knew him by name, but avoided having anything to do with him as a general rule.

'What can I do for you, Tor?' he asked, feeling around in his briefcase, readying his taser to deal with any imminent physical threat. He got a feel for where the other three were positioning themselves.

'Man lookin' for you, Hunter. Says I should bring you to him.'

'That a fact? What's he offered you?'

'Thousand bucks.'

Hunter whistled. 'That much.' He took a step closer to Tor. 'Want to double it?'

Tor laughed. 'What, Hunter? You saying you'll give me two grand?'

'No, I'm saying you can collect your grand from the guy looking for me, and I'll give you a grand if you lead him to where I tell you. In fact, I'll pay you first.'

'Where the fuck you' gonna get a grand?'

'Don't worry about that, I've got the money. But it's my way, got it?'

'I don' know, Hunter. These are pretty serious guys.'

'They paid you yet?'

'No. They've offered a thousand bucks to anyone who brings you to them. The whole street's lookin' to collect. But I aim to get it, see?'

'I do. And you're saying they're solid for the dough? You know them that well, huh?'

'Well … no. It's like a reward, dude. You know, "captured dead or alive"

— I capture you and bring you in, I get a reward.'

'Doubt I'd be worth a thousand bucks dead, Tor. All the same, I'd watch my back if I were you, it could be you who ends up dead. Like you said, they're serious guys. What if you take me to them but they don't pay you, what are you gonna do then?'

'What do you suggest, then?'

'You come with me now, I'll give you a thousand bucks. Then you go find those guys and tell them that you'll take them to me and they give you the thousand bucks when they see me. Don't worry, I'll make it easy. But here's the thing — you have to get your money before they get me, understand? 'Cos after that, you won't be able to get it. Of course you could just stiff me, take my thousand and go blow it on dope or whatever and not bother telling them. But there's one difference isn't there?'

'What difference?'

'I know where to find you.' Hunter waited while his words sunk in.

Tor still didn't seem convinced. 'Yeah, but if they get you, you're dead, man. These are serious lookin' fuckers — they're special forces or somethin'. You musta' done somethin' real bad against them.'

'Maybe. So, do we have a deal?'

After handing Tor the promised money, Hunter returned to his hideaway. This time, he used a hidden access located near the old warden's house. It took him down a storm drain and through a manhole that opened in the ceiling of the collapsed tunnel on the gaol side of the room. He left the cover off the opening. This would also be his escape route.

He'd instructed Tor to find the pursuers and keep tabs on them for the following hour, and then approach them and lead them to the car park.

'There'll be a parking bay sectioned off with witch's hats,' he told him. 'Tell them to park in that bay, they'll see a small gate in the embankment just in front to the right a little. Tell them the gate will be open, tell them you watched me go in there — have one of your boys say they've been watching for you — and then you checked it was still open. It will be, don't worry. Then ask for your money and get the fuck outta there.'

Tor had laughed. 'What you gonna do, old man?' The derision was unmistakable. 'There's like a fucken' army of them, and just one of you.'

In the north of the city, along the waterfront from the Stirling bridge, a black Range Rover slowly cruised the streets, stopping occasionally against curbs where no streetlight fell, its passengers, dressed in black, alighting and walking the alleys and underpasses, peering into doorways and boltholes, searching for a face among the homeless who have settled in for the night.

The passengers, Swaddick, Dosek and two German Shepherds, moved with the stealth of night owls, coming up on exiles like apparitions from the mists, their silent presence inspiring the dread of an executioner, deliberately played in sharp contrast to the promise of a thousand dollars for anyone who could produce the evasive Hunter. None were able to help. The car kept cruising.

At one point, one of Tor's lackeys crawled beneath the vehicle and attached a device like a mobile phone via a magnetic pad. The magnetic contact activated the transmitter and Hunter followed the vehicle's movements on a hand-held GPS tracking device. It was just after ten-thirty when the vehicle

parked in the car park. Hunter was ready.

It took several minutes before the smell of a man's sweat swept into the room; Hunter caught it at exactly the same time as a hidden motion sensor activated the solenoids of a series of fire sprinklers. A wall of fine spray showered from the roof above the rockfall in the entrance tunnel, behind the intruder.

Hunter flicked the switch on the one and only power point. A bank of work lights lit the tunnel entrance in full glare. The man wore night vision goggles and held a handgun at the ready. The sudden intensity of the glare momentarily blinded him, but as he raised his hand to tear them away from his eyes, Hunter was already on the move. He brought an axe handle down on the intruder's gun hand. As the weapon clattered to the floor Hunter's waddy was already in motion again. This time it struck the man's knees. The crack of bone cut through the air as he sank to the floor. A third blow followed, striking the victim across the shoulders. He never once cried out.

Hunter picked the weapon up off the floor and sat on the far side of the small table, in the dark, and raised a revolver which he aimed directly at the figure on the floor.

'Just for your information,' Hunter said, 'that spray behind you is live with two hundred and forty volts. It's earthed to the sluice that runs along the wall. If you attempt to go back, you'll be fried to a crisp. Anyone who attempts to follow you will be fried to a crisp. I've got your weapon, but the one I'm pointing at you is a standard issue world war two Webley forty-five. It's perfectly maintained, fully loaded, cocked and, right now, aimed at a point between your eyes. The hollow points in here will reshape your head and I have no compunction whatsoever in pulling this trigger. Do you understand me?'

'I understand,' the man said, blinking rapidly and holding his hand up to shield the intensity of the light.

'Good. If I were you, I'd play nice and make sure all my questions get answered before that water flows down here, which it will do, eventually. So, hit your communicator button and let your mates out there know that I'm here. Any code words and you get a bullet between the eyes.'

'You know you won't be getting out of here, old man.'

'Listen pal, I'm not the one crippled on the floor. Communicate.'

'Jesus Christ, mate. What fuckin' era are you livin' in? My partner's heard every word since I got in here.'

'Good, then he'll know what to expect if he tries to come down that tunnel.'

Hunter rose from the table and stood over the man on the floor, the gun in his left hand and cudgel in his right. 'Where's your communicator?' The man didn't respond. Hunter briefly inspected his gear and swung a vicious blow at the man's kidneys. The resounding *crack!* cut the air like a shattered window. Hunter swung again at the other side, but the man doubled up and the axe handle landed on his ribs. This crack did not sound like splintering plastic. Another blow and Hunter found his mark. The electronic device disintegrated, and a spray of fine pieces spread like midges across the light. Hunter reached down and tore a tiny lavelier microphone from the collar.

'This is pretty hi-tech gear you've got here, soldier?' he said as he backed away to his table. 'What's your name?'

'Don't use one.'

'Really? Your mates out there must call you something. Dickhead,

Arsewipe, Jack the Fuckin' Ripper?… What about your boss … wouldn't be that Irish fella would it? What's his name?'

'I'm not answering your questions, old man.'

'Sean. Sean Dower. That's his name. But that's okay, you don't want to talk — some sort of macho soldier solidarity bullshit no doubt, take one for the team and all that crap. Now who's the one living in some fucking warped era, eh? What do you want? I've heard he's offered some junkies a thousand bucks for me … what's that about?'

'That's two questions … no, three actually. What did I just tell you?'

'Okay, have it your way — it's your funeral … well it will be because time's run out. See, I'm guessing that water will reach you in about ten seconds and I'm leaving this way.' He pointed behind him. 'There'll be a minor rock fall down here after I leave. Good luck.'

Hunter picked up a small backpack and disappeared into the tunnel behind him, climbed up to the manhole and pushed the backpack into a crevice beneath the ceiling. As he was about to drop the cover in place, a scream reached him from the other tunnel. Someone had decided to test his electrified water trap. If there was one thing his war with the Gordionis had taught him, it was not to bluff.

13

Monday 12 August — 26 days before the election

Boulter arrived at the site just before 7 a.m.; a crime scene perimeter had been taped off, the electricity services re-routed and restored, work lights blazed and an excavation crew had begun work on clearing away the collapsed limestone. The weather was unsettled, which corresponded neatly with Boulter's constitution as she mounted the steps of the mobile command centre.

McPherson had called her early and instructed her to coordinate the investigation. Before she arrived, she knew it would be complicated: a messy, multi-agency affair prone to the kind of ego stress that leads to investigative constipation where nothing happens because *somebody*, *anybody* and *nobody* are all present and accounted for. She noted one bright light on the horizon: the forensics lead — Sergeant Greg Chapman — thorough, methodical, all business. And no personality to speak of. One thing Boulter knew was that you could trust Greg Chapman to keep it short.

She was the last to arrive. She stood, leaning against a bulkhead, in preference to sitting among a wild festival of early morning testosterone. Coffee was poured from an urn; it was bitter and stale and strong and handed around as though it were the elixir of life itself. For some of these poor sods, it probably was, given the stony faces and deep soot of tired eyes.

Greg Chapman opened proceedings by introducing those he thought may not be known to each other. Boulter took little notice of the names. He then ran through the timeline of events as they came to the notice of the investigative team. Nothing struck Boulter as out of the ordinary. There was an explosion a few minutes before eleven o'clock the previous evening — eight hours earlier. It caused a collapse of limestone.

'Although there's no certainty at this time that the rockfall didn't cause

the explosion,' a city engineer announced.

'Quite,' Chapman said, and continued with his summary. Boulter jotted one or two salient details in her notebook and when Chapman had finished she drew a short summary.

'So, electricity, water and gas …' it wasn't quite a question, but it wasn't a statement either. 'Thoughts on cause?'

The fire expert played with his coffee for a moment or two, leaving rings of coffee stain on the lacquered surface of the table. He looked at Boulter, his expression serious and his tone reserved. No-one wants to make any proclamations this early in an investigation, it only makes them look foolish.

'Whatever happened in there,' he said, 'it happened quickly. Fortunately the gas shuts off at the junction valve as soon as there is a pressure loss, so only what was in the pipe combusted. It will take some time before we know what caused the rupture, and what brought electricity and water into the mix.'

'We don't know if there are any people involved,' the city engineer said, and he rolled out a large plan, with recent markings in red and blue and green.

He traced a line with his finger as Boulter leaned across the table to see. 'There was a collapsed tunnel that ran along here. The roof at the bend here collapsed some years ago and we considered it a public hazard so the tunnel mouth, what there was of it, was boarded up. More recently a locked wire mesh gate was fitted. Our surveyors have marked earlier rock falls up the top here, which appears to be around where the explosion happened. There's a lot of water runs beneath here, and with this rain we've been having, it's just possible that this was another rock fall, but somehow with a gas line and power line caught up. We won't know until we excavate back into this area.'

A knock on the door caught Boulter's attention. She opened it and peered out. A young female uniformed officer stood with a scruffy looking teenager by her side. Boulter stepped down to the ground and closed the door behind her.

'I'm sorry to barge in, Detective,' the constable said, 'but this young man has some information that might be helpful.'

Boulter studied him. He was dirty, his clothes unwashed, sores littered his arms, and his face was a mottled patchwork of chalk-white and crimson pocked with pustules of late adolescent pimples. He wore a torn and threadbare woollen jumper, olive green dungarees and white Volleys riddled with holes. He was malnourished and, she guessed, not more than seventeen. She led him to her car and opened the passenger side door for him. He baulked.

'It's okay,' Boulter said, 'we can talk in here because there's a meeting going on there' — pointing to the trailer she had just left. Then, as if a sudden thought occurred to her — 'Why don't we go and get some breakfast?'

'So what's your name?' She'd driven around to a breakfast cafe in Essex Street, and they were all but alone in the restaurant, sat opposite each other by the window. She'd ordered a coffee and croissant for herself, and a breakfast of sausages, bacon, eggs, tomato and baked beans, with toast and tea for the boy.

'Spider.'

'Spider? Is that it?'

'It's what my mum called me.'

'I see. Who's your mum?'

'A junkie whore named Jackie Webb.'

'Ah, So you're Spider Webb?'

'Nah, jus' Spider.'

The tea and coffee arrived. Boulter watched him dump five packets of white sugar into his tea. He splashed it with milk and stirred noisily. 'What about your dad?'

'He's in gaol. Good thing too.'

'Why's that?'

'He's a violent prick — beats up women and children.'

'How old are you Spider?'

'Dunno, maybe 'bout seventeen.'

'How long you been on the streets?'

'Since I was 'bout ten.'

Boulter wasn't surprised, but a sudden image of another young man flooded her mind. She saw it as clear as though it were yesterday, but it was six years ago in a Northbridge lane at two o'clock on a freezing Friday morning.

A son she'd given birth to seventeen years before who lay unconscious with a belly full of gutter drugs and cheap wine; a son she'd been searching for since he was ten; a son she'd given up nothing for in those first ten years; a son for whom she would have given up everything ever since that night. A son who had every right not to trust those duty bound to love him.

It was touch and go, the paramedics said. One minute he was gone, the next they said he was still breathing. Boulter held that icy hand and begged him to stay and fight, or was it to fight and stay? Either way, he scraped through and she swore silently that she would protect him, nurse him, make him whole again.

She was only 17 when he was born, conceived just three months after she had joined the navy when her superior officer at HMAS Leeuwin, a lieutenant

who believed he had a god given right to her body, raped her. She took leave and gave birth in her mother's Housing Commission house in Bentley, cheap vodka for painkiller, and buried in enough shame and guilt to choke the Catholic Church. She suffered and ran, seeking and accepting postings in the far corners of the world — active duty wherever it was to be found, leaving her mother to raise the boy.

She was in the Baltic for the boy's first birthday, the Timor Sea for his second and the Gulf of Arabia when he turned seven. He was ten when her mother suffered a stroke and died. She left the Navy, deciding she would make a go of parenting. But less than a month after her return he disappeared one night. She searched but turned up nothing. It was then she turned to forensic science, for which her naval training in medicine proved a solid foundation. But there was nothing like suffering through the hard lessons of real life. She applied every theory, tested every angle, scratched at the remotest clues, followed threads so fine they threatened to snap at the slightest tension. And when she found him, he was close enough to death for her to feel her own life force falter.

But she nursed him and brokered a kind of peace, and began to share something of his life. As it stands, Lucas's story, although a rocky road, is still a work in progress seven years on. He's no longer living with her, having struck out on his own three years earlier in what appears to be a loving relationship with a nice boy called Tom. *Tom!* For God's sake. But at least, when he needs it, I am there for him.

But who is there for you, Spider?

His plate was piled high and the attack was frenzied, wolfing down shovelfuls at a time.

'Whoa, whoa …' Boulter said, laughing, 'take your time, there's no hurry, chew it, taste it. Enjoy it.' Her eyes flashed a warmth she hadn't felt in a long time. She watched as he bit off a chunk of toast and forked in a crispy bacon rasher bathed in the golden yellow of a soft egg yolk. All you need is someone to be there, just someone …

She let him finish and ordered a refill for his tea. 'Tell me about last night,' she urged, bringing the professional cop back to the table.

'Don't know a lot,' he replied. 'But we was jus' leavin' the railway bridge — musta been about seven, seven-firty, ay? — when this big guy — military lookin' guy — comes up to us an' arks if we seen Hunter. There was four of us … yeah, Tor an' us free—'

'Tor?'

'He's our leader, like …'

'So … what — you're in gang?'

'It's not really a gang, more like a bruvvahood, yeah, we're like bruvvas. So anyway, we says "nah, aven't seen 'im" — 'cos even if we had, you don't tell some fucker you never seen before where someone is, right? But then this guy says he'll give us a fousand bucks if we can find Hunter and bring him to the guy. Well that changes fings dunnit? I mean a fousand is a fousand, that ain't small change that ain't.'

'So did you get your thousand?'

'Well, no. We was 'sposed to, but no we didn't.'

'What happened?'

'Hunter … see he's smart. He offered us anuvver fousand if we'd bring the guy lookin' for 'im to where 'is crib's at.'

'And where's that?'

'Well, see, we didn't know 'till he tole us … but it's right there, where the explosion was.'

Boulter shook her head. 'I don't understand, Spider. In the old warden's house?'

'I dunno, really … don't fink anyone knew where Hunter really 'ad 'is crib — doubt it though — I fink it was under there somewhere.… Anyway, first Hunter took us to a ATM on Market Street an' he gave Tor a fousand, jus' like that. Fucken amazin'. And then he left and we waited a while and then went an' found the guy and tole him to meet us up at the car park — near the turn where all them bushes are.'

'Right … where the explosion happened?'

'Yeah.' Spider took a sip of his tea.

Boulter had to break the silence. 'So this guy, Hunter, paid you a thousand … but what?… you were expecting to get a thousand off the other guy as well?'

'Yeah, it was Hunter's idea, see … he said for us to bring 'em up to where his crib was, like I said, but when they arrived — there were free of 'em in a big black four wheel drive — they said they couldn't see 'im and the guy wouldn't give Tor the money until he knew for sure.

'So one of 'em, fucken' big bloke, real soldier lookin' bloke, wearin' a gear belt an' torch an' gun, gets out an' Tor points to this spot behind the trees — there's a wire gate in the side of the ground. You couldn't see it normally, but this bloke goes to the gate, pushes it and goes inside. He's talkin' to the uvver one over the radio frough their shirt collars and ear buds, freaky shit man, these are fucken heavy dudes … and then after a while it's all quiet — like the bloke

inside's not answerin' his radio, see. It looks like somefin' heavy's gonna go down, so Tor arks for the money so we can get out of there, but the bloke tells 'im he still hasn't seen Hunter so he says for Tor to go inside an' see what's happened to 'is mate.'

Spider fell silent and took a long drink of his tea. Boulter nudged him to continue, 'And?…'

'Yeah well, he went in didn't he?… An' then there was a loud crack like a lightning bolt and the whole ground just fell in. Me an' the rest of us fucken' ran. I didn't see what happened to the car.'

'So, you think there are bodies in there?'

'Well, yeah … fuck yeah. Tor didn't come out and that soldier bloke … Fucked if I know about Hunter … I fink there's somethin' goin' on here. Tor used to tell us that the guvmint was doin' all this sort of shit to get rid of us — to kill us who live on the streets. Hunter said these guys could make all the fish in Fremantle smell bad. They were huntin' Hunter—'

'Wait. What was that you said about the fish?'

'Yeah … it's what 'e said about them guys, that they make the fish in Fremantle smell bad … somefink like that. Anyway, you don't get all that soldier gear … guns and night goggles and shit like that unless you're the guvmint, right? They looked like fucken' soldiers, tell you …' And at that point, he just ran out of story and energy. 'I dunno what happened.' It was barely a whisper.

Boulter drew her phone out and punched in a number. Chapman came on the line and Boulter told him what she'd just learnt.

There were three big questions in Boulter's mind as she mounted the stairs to

her office: Who was Hunter? Why were these soldier types looking for him? And was the explosion an accident or deliberate? She didn't buy into coincidences, which is why she felt the last point was a direct result of the first two, and therefore couldn't be an accidental occurrence.

And why the sight of Max Glendinning leaving McPherson's office as she crossed the situation room sent a bead of cold sweat rolling down her spine.

She sat at her desk and logged onto the central records system. There was already a file on the Parry Street car park incident — with Greg Chapman involved, she knew there would be — so she added a new record, typing up her interview with Spider — identified as *Witness#1* — as quickly as words could form. She uploaded the picture she'd taken of him from her phone and flagged as 'urgent' the possibility of as many as three persons buried in the rubble. She flicked through the reports that had been uploaded from the mobile command centre, but at this stage no new details were available. She opened the timeline file and added *Witness#1* to it and the possible time frame of activity at the site. This would be useful information to the pathologists if bodies were recovered.

While she was logged on, she pulled up the file from last year involving Glendinning and Lazaar — the one called *Operation WTF* — which actually did not stand for 'what the fuck'. What triggered her interest in revisiting the file was what Spider said about Hunter's comment on the fish in Fremantle. She typed in the search terms and was immediately rewarded. Several years prior to the investigation, suspicions involving the Gordioni family and drug trafficking through the port were raised by a journalist in an article that ran in the West Australian entitled, *Why Fremantle's Fish are on the Nose*. The byline, Calvin Bishop.

'You gotta be kidding me,' she said under her breath, clicking on the link for Bishop, bringing up another file in the context of the investigation. Bishop had disappeared, date unknown, thought to have gone missing at sea, no foul play suspected, but no body ever found. There was a photo. She could print it and ask Spider for an ident. She dug further back into Bishop's history as a journalist and suddenly snapped on the Kalgoorlie connection. Lazaar, you fucker. You've got a deep cover asset, and he was there. Hunter is Calvin Bishop. 'Bet my fuckin' badge on it,' she said.

'Bet your badge on what?' Parker stood in the doorway a printout in his hand and a silly, boyish grin across his dial.

Boulter closed the browser window and looked up at the detective. 'That you would walk in here any minute now with really good news.'

'Jesus! Sergeant, you're a bloody mind reader. It just so happens we've caught a break on the paint.'

'The paint?'

'Yep' — he looked down at the page in his hand — 'the batch was made at Dulux in O'Connor and sold to three panel beaters — one in Midland, one in Kewdale and one in O'Connor.'

'O'Connor. Fits the location. Any word from Baxter on the bin?'

'Uh … yeah, he called in about half an hour ago. Said there's no way he can pinpoint the location or the time of the theft. Mystery, he says.'

Boulter looked doubtful, and said, 'The only mystery with him is the mystery of when he'll do any actual work.' She took a beat while she thought about the next line of action. 'Right … need a document package on all three panel shops. I want to know everything about them before we go knocking on

doors … name of business, how long in business, owners, landlords, whether they pay their rent, tax records, types of insurance jobs they do … and check with MV for any history as chop shops. Do it this morning; we'll go toot their horns this afternoon — at least the O'Connor one.'

'Will do. Oh yeah, Super said for you to go see him.'

Boulter logged out of her computer, picked up her notebook and pen, and headed for McPherson's office. She knocked and walked in, unbidden.

'Want to see me, Sir?'

'Yes, lass. Come in, close the door, have a seat I'll be just a moment.' He busied himself with some handwritten notes on a file, scrawled a hasty signature, punched the intercom button on his desk phone and called his personal assistant in to take the file.

He reprimanded the girl. 'Last week's figures are wrong, lass. A bit more care checking my notes, please. Get them in order and send them through. The brass are waiting on them.' He nodded his dismissal. Boulter couldn't help but feel the show was for her benefit. Power, no matter how small, is its own aphrodisiac. He wants me to see his potency.

'We have a breakthrough,' he said when they were once again alone.

'Yes, Parker has just filled me in on the paint.'

'Paint? What are you talking about, lass?'

'The paint from the wheelie bin, Sir, we've identified the batch and its distribution. Parker's backgrounding three panel shops this morning.'

'Oh, good. Yes, that's good. But no, lass, I'm talking about a tip off we got. We'll raid at dawn tomorrow. You can do the panel shops after if you need to. I want a full briefing at thirteen hundred — the full team and involve the

Tactical lads too will you … can't be too careful with these jihadists. Oh … and talk to media relations will you? We want the lid on this locked down tight for the time being. Need to know only.'

'Jihadist, Sir?'

'I think so. His name is Mahmoud Khalil. I'll take the lead on this one Detective Sergeant, I think it's warranted.'

'Of course, Sir. Can I ask where the tip off came from?…'

McPherson appeared to consider the request for several moments. 'I don't think that would be appropriate at this moment, lass. It's bit sensitive.'

There was a lightness to her step as Boulter returned to her office. With a murder suspect in sight and the potential of a high profile result, the posting back to Major Crimes looked closer.

14

Boulter has not returned any of my calls over the weekend. I grow anxious that I do not have any kind of agreement with her to secure Falullah's safety. I grow anxious that Hunter has vanished after placing Lavender in peril and apparently leaving nought but a key and a cryptic message. I grow anxious that killers are on the loose and I have no way of knowing who they are or where to find them. From first thing Monday I begin to feel Friday closing in; it isn't a good feeling.

I buy some extra time from Gardner in a brief meeting on Monday morning arguing my need to digest some recent research on different approaches to creative writing. It is a meeting I sweat through, willing my phone to tone me out, which it never does. I leave that meeting and head to Club Murdoch for another one with Ricard Koffi, which he has asked for. I hope it will be quick.

He's waiting when I arrive, his beard has grown, he wears a dark-coloured peaked cap pulled down over his brow, and I quickly note that his demeanour is a little dull. I pay no real heed to it, students are under all sorts of pressure, especially those from another part of the world. He'll figure it out.

'What's up?' I ask, putting my coffee and an iced pastry before me as I sit.

'My characters,' he says, without further elaboration.

'Sounds like a worry,' I say, an effort to draw him out.

'My guy, Issa, came to this country to escape tyranny. When he was a kid, he saw his parents butchered, he hid behind a washing barrel as a mob of bastards chopped them with machetes. He didn't move or make a sound until long after they left and the blood that poured down and he was kneeling in had gone sticky and the flies started buzzing and biting. He doesn't want that for his

family, so he got out. But wherever he goes, the authorities, the police, men in dark uniforms, they ask questions he can't answer, they make him believe he is always on the wrong side of the law. So, even here, in a country where the cops are good, he finds he's stopped and asked questions about where he's been, where he's going like he's up to no good. Security guards follow him around supermarket aisles, transport guards ask to see his ticket, but ignore anyone white.'

'So he doesn't trust cops, I get it.'

'So what sticks in his mind after he sees this murder, are the dark uniforms and the killers cutting the victim's throat. A bright flash goes off and it scares him. He doesn't know what it is, whether it's a gunshot or a spark, maybe they want to burn the place down to cover their tracks, or even if it's his own memory playing tricks. But it wasn't those. These guys take a photo of their work, to show their boss that the job is done.

'Issa is paranoid, he runs and runs and runs, he doesn't go to work, he avoids people because he doesn't know if he was seen. But he's got to survive. So he decides he needs to find these guys and deal with it so he can be free. Free of the threat. Free of his torment. To him, they grow into the same thing.'

'I'm liking it,' I say. 'But he can't do this alone, right?'

'That's part of my problem. He needs to gather a little band around him to help get this done. I'm not sure who those characters should be. On the antagonist side, though, when the murderers show the picture to their boss, the boss thinks he can see a face looking through the window. It's a bit like seeing an image of Jesus in the bark of a tree though, because the window's dirty, and it's

quite far away, so how can he be sure? He takes it to a specialist, and they decide it is a face, and do one of those e-fit things to produce an image of who it might be. Then he sends his guys out to hunt for Issa.'

'So the conspiracy is what?'

'The murderers are doing it for someone else, that's because the guy who orders the hit has money and power, but, obviously, he can't get his hands dirty.'

'Why does he have this guy killed?'

'That's a good question … I'm thinking it has to be something political. The victim knew something, so he had to be taken care of.'

'You need a guardian character for Issa,' I say, 'someone he turns to who can help to find a way through, someone with good advice and a bag of tricks.'

He's thoughtful. 'Maybe a private investigator type, someone whose relationship with the cops borders on criminal, but he still has a solid contact or two.'

There is something about the way Ricard is describing this that starts to make me feel a little uncomfortable, but I can't quite put my finger on it. 'Tell me, in your mind, is Issa being tested for moral rigour, testing the morals of another character, or testing the circumstances in which he finds himself?'

'Well, his morals are in question if he can't go to the cops with what he sees … that leads to a complication of his circumstances, maybe a series of worsening complications. Testing the morals of the antagonist?… Hmm .. maybe it could be written that way. You know, he could come across someone else who is interested in this villain, and they team up, but they have moral differences too.'

'What about someone whose loyalty to Issa is tested? I'm still not convinced you have established a strong enough reason to put Issa in the situation in the first place. Issa's reason for being at the murder site …'

'He was walking home after work.'

'Yes, I remember you saying that. But lights and noises coming from a factory at night doesn't convince me. Give him a reason for being there that could test the loyalty of someone close to him. Someone he has to lie to. Someone who could be convinced that Issa may not be telling the truth. Who could that be? Wife? Colleague? Friend? Teacher? Criminal partner?…'

We end it there. He thanks me, pulls his cap down over his brow, hoists a backpack over one shoulder, and leaves me wondering why I am feeling uneasy.

After my meeting with Ricard Koffi, I have a quiet coffee with Wi Fi, who informs me that everything is in place for Falullah's enrolment, all he needs is the legend — a name with an academic history that he can slip into the system. Simple enough. Then Falullah will have a new identity, her studentship, and accommodation in the student village for six months. Hidden in plain sight.

But the legend is the problem. And Friday the deadline.

'Can't you just make up a name and enrol her?' I ask.

'No, man! Two people have to sign off on the enrolment. They check the application history and if it's not all there they will ask questions. If they do that, we're fucking history. The enrolment has to be genuine, okay? A confirmed hundred point identity, a history of education with accessible transcripts, tax file number — a verifiable legend all the way through. Without it we'd be done

before she started. We'd both be out of a job and in gaol, man. Fuck that.'

'Where do we get this legend from?'

'The Registrar General's office.'

'You're kidding, right?'

'No. Three agencies use legends regularly. ASIO use false identities to protect their spies — I guess other countries have live legends running around, so that would be four, only they wouldn't be on our books — the Attorney General's department use them mainly for witness protection, but sometimes they grant them to Community Services to protect women at risk. And the cops — state and feds — use them for undercover operations … you with me?'

I nod, dumbly I think.

'Well the identities are supplied by the Registrar General's office because they have to be based on an original and authentic birth certificate.'

'Birth certificate?'

'Yes. That is the only evidence someone actually exists — all other identity documents arise from the birth certificate—'

'Well, that is a worry. I thought they just made up a name.'

'Can you imagine how risky that would be for an undercover cop? Or a woman on the run from a violent husband? What if they had to open a bank account or something? No, the identity has to be genuine.'

'Can you hack them?'

'Hack them?' His laugh is particularly unkind. 'You watch too much science fiction, Lazaar. Creating an identity is a fucking complex business. Identities they use for legends are birth certificates that are no longer needed—'

'How can it be no longer needed?'

'They're dead. They choose deceased identities born within a range of years that might match the subject and died young. The death certificate is suppressed by an executive order, and a deed of name change is registered against the birth certificate. Once a deed of name change is registered, the identity is new and the deed serves as the originating document. These new identities are flagged and highly protected.'

'Jesus! That's a lot of paperwork. How many of these are around?'

'A lot. And they're protected under a classification system — the paperwork is necessary to protect the decision makers, not so much the subjects. The different agencies can apply to the Registrar General for "operational identities". Obviously the real person's identity remains secret, but they build up the components of the operational identity before putting it in play, so they will have bank accounts, a driver's licence, passport maybe, federal police checks, a real address, energy bills … whatever might be needed for the legend to be completely authentic and employed. The trick is to get one that roughly matches your girl's age and has the right educational history. The photographic details and any change of address — stuff like that — are applied to it later.'

'Fuck! What a worry. How are we going to do that?'

'Do you know any female undercover cops?'

'As a matter of fact I do … well at least she was undercover a couple of years ago.'

'Oh.'

It is a flat sound. 'What does that mean?' I ask.

'Well, if she was undercover but no longer, the legend may already have been burnt.'

Any chance of Boulter being the solution pretty much vanishes right there and then. I hadn't realised the complexity of it. Of course another avenue is possible, but my poetic licence has never been tested in these waters. Besides, there is no telling who will be in the loop for something like this, and that is exposure I don't feel inclined to risk. What I do not know is that the answer will be burning a hole in my pocket later tonight, only I won't know it until Thursday.

15

Wednesday, 21 August — 17 days before the election

I visit Falullah at Lavender's that Wednesday evening. I want to know more about how she came to know of her brother's murder. I want as much detail as she can recall.

'I was on the bus when Mahmoud sat down in front of me,' she says, dredging the memories up. 'He said he had something to show me, but no one else could see it. I was right next to the door. He leaned over the seat and had this little camera in his hands. "Look," he says to me "that is Ishmail hanging from the chains." All I can see is a picture of a body … I can't see for sure that it's Ishmail because the picture isn't that big, and the face is not clear. The shape, it looks like Ishmail, but I haven't seen him for a long time, so I have to take Mahmoud's word for it. I don't get to look at it long, but I can see whoever it is, the head is hanging at a funny angle. There are some reflections from the camera's flash in the background. That's all I remember, really. Mahmoud tells me that Ishmail wanted to go to the authorities because Yusuf hadn't kept his promise, but that's what happens if you cross these people, he says. I remember looking him in the eyes and asking, "Is this really Ishmail?" He places his hand over his heart and says "Upon Allah" I think, meaning that it is a God's truth. I want to look again, but he takes it away and puts it in his pocket. It was just a photo, but I'm sure it was Ishmail. I think he wanted to warn me. So when the bus stopped at the traffic lights, I opened the door and ran. I don't know what I was thinking …'

'Okay, so apart from the body and some reflections from the camera's flash, you can't recall anything else in the picture?'

She says no and asks what I might be looking for, to which I say I'm not sure, because that's the truth. I feel like I'm scratching at an itch I can't reach, and

so decide to leave it at that. I ask what she's been doing, hoping for some levity.

'Reading the university handbook,' she replies. 'I think I will enrol in international politics and security. When do you think I can?' I try to appear calm, assuring her that all will be in order by the end of the week.

I hope it won't turn out to be a lie.

She had also been writing, Lavender tells me, insisting I read her work.

It is extraordinary. She writes for the cathartic relief it brings against the terrible burdens imposed by a violent recent history. Her expression lends her a voice that transcends the pain of loss and grief and enters an entirely new plane; it is angelic, soft, understanding and forgiving. A kind of poetry that is found at the root of all prayer. A healing I had rarely encountered.

It is necessary to face my inner demons before I face those on the surface, she writes. *So I will write for you about the things that happen inside when, one by one, those whom I love are plucked from my world to become scores on the boards of men who do not value a touch, a smile, a whispered endearment. Such scores do not scar me; they embrace me, they fulfil me, for they are no measure of achievement to those who would rob the world of love and compassion. They are a measure of my faith; spirits held in my heart, near in the hope that they will not leave me without the courage to not be vengeful. These men will not rob me.*

How, I wonder, can you suffer so greatly and not be vengeful? And there is much to remind me of her plight.

That evening's news reports a boat capsized 120 nautical miles north of Christmas Island.

Border Protection crews have suspended operations after rescuing one hundred

and six passengers from the scene. Survivors report that five people are still missing, believed to have gone down with the vessel.

Grist for the mills of the political campaigners. Four asylum seekers died on Saturday from a capsized vessel, one last Tuesday and now another five are believed drowned. Almost two hundred people in all — men, women and children from the Middle East and Sri Lanka. The media is full of it, and the resulting political rhetoric deafening, the incumbent government obvious in its impotence, failed 'solutions' and national inhospitality. Words such as 'illegal immigrants', and 'queue jumpers' buzz out of the Opposition's camp like bush flies in the outside toilet. The shadow minister for justice makes a brief appearance on the news.

'The daily ferry service to Australia continues courtesy of the people smugglers,' he says, his quarry-faced expression panning precisely a rehearsal from earlier in the day — the religious fervour unmistakable. '… the facts speak for themselves with twenty five boats carrying almost seventeen hundred people having arrived this month alone.' Where, I wonder, are these guys getting their media training? '… to break the people smugglers' business model you need to implement a suite of tough border policies — something the Coalition will do …'

I zone out.

Ever since LOTO announced his proposed militarised border protection scheme on the 25th of last month a soundbox of contagion has spread thicker than Vegemite on a fresh horseshoe roll. Most notable is the fact that the Coalition release their media statements through the one news source that has the most to gain from a change in government, a fact that has the unavoidable consequences of the public broadcaster having to pick up the slops.

I remember vividly that appearance.

Flanked by dark-suited apparatchiks, each a head and shoulders taller than LOTO, posed before a blue backdrop with gold writing urging Australians to *Choose a better future*, and *Choose a strong Australia*, the camera operator using the flanking to frame the image, its *mis-en-scene* belonging entirely to the character at its centre. LOTO's expression of faux concern had said most of it, his words merely the colour. He began by announcing he was about to make a major announcement; an important development of the Coalition's border protection policy.

A deep breath to illustrate the gravity of what is to come, that shifty little look left then right as though stepping into the ring — forever the pugilist — a small oblong of paper in his right hand that never scores a glance, and he launches into it.

As you know, the crisis on our borders has become a national emergency. We've had almost fifty thousand illegal arrivals by boat, we've had almost eight hundred illegal boats, we've had a thousand or more deaths at sea, we've had ten million dollars plus in border protection blowouts. The problem is getting worse: this government can't solve it; the coalition will solve it.…

I make a quick mental analysis of the speech. Fifty grows to eight-hundred, the thousands into millions; an image of five ratchets to eight before it becomes a thousand or more; repetition — illegal arrivals, illegal boats; border protection, a problem, the first fear … followed by what's probably the most unimaginable horror for a public Australian: deaths at sea. It doesn't matter that we have three thousand deaths a year on our roads, but deaths at sea … that's not tragic, it's unimaginable.

I feel for Falullah. How seeing the plight of others in circumstances she has lived through must make her feel. How it must be to have all you have known taken from you at gun point. And then to arrive in a foreign land, the hollow ring of the people smuggler's promise sounding loudly, only to find the welcome mat pulled sharply out from under. Imprisoned by those charged with your welfare, branded 'illegal' by a would-be prime minister. I have never imagined my country to be so cruel, so harsh, so final.

It was all too perfectly timed, it seemed, with the arrival of another two boats, bringing the number seeking asylum in less than five days to almost four hundred. And the media frenzy grows right alongside with increasingly improbable headlines that take the discourse from 'illegal immigrants' to an 'invasion'.

LOTO pushes on. Arrivals of the few days past an example of a weak government, soft on people smugglers, he claims, out of its depth. Tougher measures are called for. And, as if to ice the cake, he argues that his proposed policy is necessary to save lives at sea. Lives, he says, the current government has no regard for.

On the same day, and as a strange aside, another announcement comes to my attention. It does not garner a lot of press, and nor does it seem in any way remotely connected to anything else going on in my life in particular, but Hunter's odd comment to Lavender, that the *confederates are combobulating*, heightens my senses to happenings that are both out of the ordinary, and connected by thin threads that don't seem to belong. Back in Kalgoorlie, Bishop had asked one day why, if discombobulating is a word describing the feeling of being thrown

into confusion, combobulating wasn't used to describe the feeling of coming out of confusion. Hunter is suggesting here that I should look for situations where the Liberals were showing those signs, only it wouldn't be obvious because combobulating isn't a word. Its purpose was to sharpen the contradictions.

This news item had all the hallmarks.

Local billionaire, Roger Lamord, announced the establishment of a ten million dollar fund to help returned armed service veterans. He called the fund the Lamord Living Foundation, so named, apparently, because a man he knew, died at the weekend. His name was Mick Dosek, a returned SAS soldier who had served in Iraq twice and subsequently in Afghanistan, and then was removed from active duty because he suffered post traumatic stress disorder. With no family support and little professional treatment, a spokesman for Lamord claimed, he was left homeless, living on the streets, and he died alone in a limestone cave collapse in Fremantle following a gas line rupture and minor explosion. The fund would provide for research into psychiatric treatments specific to the disorder, and housing and counselling for veterans at risk.

Rising Liberal Party star, Noah Carter, addresses the cameras on Lamord's behalf. Carter is standing as a candidate for a safe Liberal seat in Lamord's own Swan Valley electorate.

'Our armed services personnel are an important part of this country's protection against world terrorism and threats of invasion,' Carter tells the television audience. 'If we don't offer our service men and women, and their families, the highest quality of care after they have given more than any reasonable person would ask, how can we expect to attract the fighting talent we need in these dangerous and difficult times? A successful Liberal campaign will see matching government financial support for the Lamord Living Foundation

fund.'

What is less well known is just how much Lamord's enterprises profit from the armed services.

For several years, SANCO Catering has held contracts to supply all armed services with active service rations and mess services at home bases. His company's catering reach now extends into a great many remote mining sites, detention centres and prison populations. His ten million dollar fund is small cheese by comparison, but the media laps it up with relish.

And it turns out that my university does too, with the Vice Chancellor offering up radio commentary later the same day, applauding the investment into a very much needed area of health sciences. It looks pretty clear which university stands to gain the most.

The following morning, I leave two messages on Boulter's voicemail before leaving my office and heading for Fremantle. I am baffled at being suddenly shut-out by her, but more concerned with the pressing problem of obtaining an identity for Falullah. The window is closing and I have nothing. I decide to take the key that Lavender got from Hunter and investigate the threads he had left in his wake.

The lockup is easy enough to find — top floor of the wool stores, locker 989 — and it yields a small notebook computer, a USB drive and a scrap of paper with a lot of incoherent scribblings among which were two lines of verse I recognise immediately:

Rover, *rover*, *cattle drover* …

… *that you do not often spy*

I clear the locker, stuff the items in my briefcase and take them back to my office, where, twenty minutes later behind a locked door, I plug the USB into my laptop, only to discover it is protected by a TPM code; only the computer used to store the data can access the files.

So I power up the notebook computer. It is password protected but the clue to access lies in the lines on the scrap of paper: both from C.J. Dennis telling me the contents are vital. The first line suggests the first half of the title, *Cuppuacumalonga* and the second line, the second half of the title *Triantiwontigongolope*. But there is a third clue that I almost don't see: the 's' on 'spy' is inverted, as though written in a dysgraphic hand. Clever that. Arse about. Therefore the password: *gongolopalonga*.

I type it in and snap the USB drive into its socket. There are two folders. One called *Boulter*, and the other called *Confederates*.

I start with the one called Boulter. It contains a number of subfolders and documents of different types. I begin working quickly through the documents, reading snatches to gather up the gist of what I might be looking at. I decide I will come back later to those I need to study in further detail. But what catches my eye is a subfolder called *Genevieve Masson*. The documents reveal an enrolment and academic transcript of a French exchange student whose enrolment at Curtin University is temporarily in hiatus due to family reasons.

Hunter left a note of explanation.

It is a legend Boulter had used to infiltrate an examination fraud involving international students and English language testing three years ago. The investigation uncovered a high-level fraud and resulted in the prosecution of twelve people over 73 charges. The police service considered the action closed,

but according to Hunter's notes, the legend is still live, meaning Boulter must still have the package. Which could mean they are still after bigger fish, or she's retained it for some other reason.

Either way, it is a perfect solution for me. All I need to do is separate her from it. The way I see it, I can either get her to do this willingly or — and this is last resort thinking, mind — exercise some poetic licence. Tricky to get her to hand it over willingly if she's refusing my phone calls. I shake my head unconsciously. Why, Boulter?

Another subfolder catches my eye, this one called *Lucas*. A quick scan alerts me to two facts. First she has a son who is now about 23 years old, a fine arts student at Curtin University — that could explain why the legend is still live; a useful way to keep tabs — but more important are the series of charge sheets that seem to be unactioned. Lucas Boulter's life obviously has been challenged. He has a sealed record of juvenile offences dating back to when he was about 12, a string of petty crimes including property and drug crimes. How had Boulter gained access? Or Hunter for that matter? In July 2011, though, he had been arrested for meth-amphetamine possession, manufacture, and intent to sell and supply. But the charge has no follow through, and the arresting officer's name, along with several other lines, especially the "known associates" have been redacted.

It could have been an undercover operation. Or, and this really has me wondering now, because most people I know will cross almost any line for their kids, who had Boulter leaned on, and how had she paid for it? If there's one thing my Kalgoorlie experience taught me all those years ago, it is that the price of an inside trade can be pretty steep. But I have found my bargaining chip, all I need

to do now is to get to Boulter—

There is a loud rap on my door.

'Just a minute,' I call, snapping the computer shut, dropping it into a desk drawer and turning a key. I slip the USB into my pocket.

When I open the door I look into the clear blue eyes of Detective Sergeant Kelly Boulter. And, by her side, a young man with as classic a Teutonic shaped head as I'd ever seen — square jaw, steel-blue eyes, blonde close-cropped hair, and he stands a full head and shoulders taller than me.

'Detective—' I barely have a chance to express my surprise when Boulter cuts me off.

'—Sergeant, Boulter,' — she has her warrant card out — 'this is Detective Parker.' Clearly a show for the young cop. I cock my head and raise my eyebrows. Boulter continues, 'We'd like a word. Can we come in?'

'What — in here, my office?' I block the door and indicate over my shoulder with my thumb. It is hardly a welcoming place at the best of times, and there was nowhere to sit, certainly not enough space to accommodate young Giant Parker and all breathe the same air.

'If you don't mind,' Boulter says, taking half a step forward.

'Ah … look, there's a small conference room just down here,' I say, taking my keys from my pocket. 'We'll be a bit more comfortable there.' I step out, pull the door closed behind me, turn and lock it.

The problem with cops is, if you invite them in they can look at anything, search anywhere. If you don't they have to get a search warrant and specify exactly what it is they're looking for. Something worth keeping in mind. And Boulter's expression tells me quite plainly they are looking for something. And I

have something I prefer they don't find.

We sit around a large table, Boulter and Parker closest to the door and me on the opposite side, my back to a window. I pour each of us a glass of water from a jug I fill at the kitchenette off one end of the room. I maintain the civil distance Boulter had established.

'What can I do for you, detectives?'

'We think you may be able to help us.'

'Always like to help, Detective.'

'Detective Sergeant. Ever met a homeless man who goes by the name, "Hunter"?'

'Hunter? No I don't think so.'

Teuton-face Parker weighs in. 'You're sure about that, Doctor?'

'Just Lazaar's fine. But, yes. Pretty sure.'

The young detective screws his face up and leans forward across the table. 'Well now, that's strange *Doctor* Lazaar, because people we've talked to describe someone who looks a lot like you being seen with him.' He lays a grainy photograph on the table, then another and then a third. The pictures are stills printed off the CCTV at an ATM machine, the time codes stamped across the bottom. I study them closely, shake my head.

'This is the guy … Hunter?'

'Yep.'

'Looks a bit rough. What makes you think I know him?'

Boulter takes the lead again. 'Oh you know him, Lazaar, I know you know him. Only, you know him better under a different name.' Her eyes burrow

into mine.

I try to make sure there is no imprint back there to read. 'That a fact, Detective Sergeant? Then your question's answered isn't it?'

'My question?…'

'Unless you have another question. I'm sorry you've wasted a trip.'

The silence that falls over the room could stop freeway traffic. Boulter doesn't speak for a long time. When she does, it is two words. 'Calvin Bishop.'

'I'm sorry,' I say.

She leans forward and taps the picture in front of me. 'Look closely, Lazaar. This is Calvin Bishop.'

'Cal Bishop died ten years ago, Detective Sergeant. Lost at sea was the official cause of death. Presumed drowned. This isn't him. I don't know this man.'

'Yes, that was the official account. But this photo was taken last Friday night at nine-fifty two. It's a man who goes by the name of Hunter, withdrawing twelve hundred dollars from an ATM in Market Street, Fremantle. One of the boys who was with him, one who he gave the money to, said this guy made a comment that the "fish in Fremantle were on the nose." That phrase was coined by Bishop in a headline he wrote years ago, triggering an investigation into the Gordioni family's waterfront activities. Calvin Bishop, your ex boss from Kalgoorlie, and Hunter, your homeless friend, are one and the same. We don't know for sure, but right now he could be buried under a pile of limestone at the top of the Parry Street car park, or he could have triggered the explosion that buried the two we do know of. What do you have to say to that, Doctor Lazaar?'

'Not much, Detective Sergeant. I don't know this man.'

'Okay, have it your way.' She stands and ushers Parker to the door, before she, too, turns to leave. I remain seated, waiting until he is out the door.

'Oh, Detective Sergeant …' — she turns back, the door held ajar in her hand — 'if you'd care to leave me your number, I'll call you if anything comes to mind … unless of course, you're not taking calls.'

She hesitates a moment and then calls out through the door. 'Parker, I'll meet you at the car in five minutes.'

'Yes Sarge,' I hear. And she returns to the room, closing the door behind her.

'You're lying to me, Lazaar. I don't like being lied to. I'm going to find your friend, Hunter, and I'll get to the bottom of this. I have a witness says two people are dead because of him.'

'Two people eh? Well, I can see that's a bit of a worry, Boulter, but I don't know anything about it. But I have left messages all week — why haven't you returned my calls?'

'When it dawned on me that you've lied to me, I didn't see much point in talking to you. You've continued lying to me, so I'm going back to the office and I'll be getting McPherson to authorise a warrant to arrest you for obstruction. But, look, I'm generous — I'll give you two minutes to convince me otherwise.'

'I told you I need protection for a witness.'

'A witness to what, exactly?'

'You have an unsolved murder, Boulter. The guy in the wheelie bin. His sister is at serious risk of suffering the same fate by the same hands unless she can be protected.'

'I don't think so, Lazaar.'

'You don't think so?… What do you mean, you don't think so?'

'The person who committed that crime has been arrested. So there is no need to protect her — in fact, I'm not sure I even need her. Why don't you hand her over to Immigration and, if I need her, I can get in touch with her there.'

'Are you nuts? They'll put her back in detention, or worse, deport her.'

'Well they won't deport her while there's an active investigation into the murder of her brother — assuming she can prove he is her brother. But in any case, she's an illegal isn't she? No identity, no legal reason to be here.'

I leap from my chair and lean forward across the table, like an ape, resting on my knuckles. I'm sure my face is a pomegranate shade of purple. 'She's a fucking *asylum seeker*, Boulter. Last time I looked, it wasn't a crime to seek asylum in this country and lodge a claim to be recognised as a refugee.'

'Yeah, but it is a crime to withhold information from the police about an active investigation, Lazaar. And I intend to charge you with that. And if you want to avoid the same charge being levelled at this girl, you would be wise to get in touch with Immigration.'

I bite my tongue. I don't want to play a card from my new deck just yet, I need more time to think about it, so I try for a hedge. 'Are you sure you got the right guys?'

'Guy, Lazaar. The one who did it. Yeah, I'm sure.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'Look I can't discuss an ongoing investigation with you, okay? I got the guy, he has identified the victim, end of story. I don't need the girl. What I do know is that two people are dead because your friend led them into a trap — which has nothing to do with this, by the way. But you're obstructing that

investigation.'

She cocks her head to one side, gives me a thin smile, pulls the door open. 'I will get a warrant for your arrest. So, don't leave town.'

After she has left the room, I stand rooted to the spot, thinking, very clearly, that my options are dwindling at an alarming rate.

Hunter may have the confederates combobulating, but if I'm honest, the tone of Boulter's visit leaves me with a distinctly discombobulated feeling. It isn't comfortable, things are falling apart faster than a timber hut in a bushfire, and it takes me some time to recompose after she leaves. I sit alone in the conference room for ten minutes, thinking about what has just happened and what my next actions should be. I am curious about why I have seen nothing of the arrest she's made, who she had arrested, and even more curious as to how she twigged Hunter's identity and my connection. And why she thinks the blood of two lives might be on his hands. I can't shake the feeling that it is all connected, but none of the threads tie up.

What I know for certain is that Hunter's notebook computer and USB device are not safe in my office. I also decide that there is every likelihood that my communications are compromised — I am certain Boulter will have phone tapping and email harvesting in place by the end of the day if not already, so I go to another colleague's office, use her phone on the excuse that mine is out of commission and call Wi Fi, suggesting a meeting in the coffee shop. I also call Lavender Jensen and ask her to meet me half an hour later.

I hand Wi Fi the documents from Hunter that confirm Boulter's existing legend and ask him to use it for Falullah's enrolment. He explains that he has to expunge the Curtin University transcripts and originate her enrolment as an international student on exchange. There is a substantial risk attached to this, but

I have a plan and think we may just get it through.

I hand him the notebook and USB, asking that he check it for security and ensure it has absolutely no trace back to either me or any other person. Among the protocols for my communications, I am to refrain from using the campus wireless internet system. He will route my office IP address through a TOR connection. He then asks for my mobile phone, strips the SIM card from it, produces another, older model — gsm he calls it — inserts my SIM card into one of its two slots. I am to use my usual number only for any normal business, but secure contacts should go through the second SIM in the phone. He gives me a quick lesson in its use, at the same time assuring me that the phone has a special piece of firmware installed that leaves a smoke trail of mobile phone routers on every call, which means it can't be traced quickly and accurately.

My final request is the tricky one and I have just finished convincing him of its necessity when Lavender arrives. He leaves without introduction.

I spend the next thirty minutes explaining the situation to Lavender. Falullah has about two weeks to become familiar with her new identity. This means purchasing a suitable wardrobe, speaking mostly French, and whenever she speaks English, to do so with a modest difficulty and a French accent. It is Lavender's job to acclimatise our new French exchange student to the campus, including introducing her to her fellow students at the student village. Her student documentation will be processed over the following week to ten days, after which she will be able to collect her student identity. Lavender's campus address and phone number are the contact points for student services.

I have decided to disappear for the next week and, when I leave the campus, I drive home to Roleystone, make a show of collecting some papers in case anyone is watching, or the house is bugged, throw some clothes into a duffel bag and head down to Fremantle, where I book into the Esplanade Hotel.

16

Friday 23 August — 15 days before the election

Mick Dosek's funeral at Karrakatta was a sombre affair attended by a handful of SAS mates, a former commanding officer, Sean Dower, Swaddick and a small group of supporters. There were no family members — Dosek had left no record of any next of kin — and a contingent of press were on hand, marking the event as the first formal activity of the Lamord Living Foundation; a generous attempt to bring dignity to the sacrifices of our veterans, one TV presenter stated. Sam Codlin directed affairs and, following the service, a small lunchtime celebration was held in a private function room at Balsamic & Olive's, which Lamord also attended.

Lamord left early for his Cottesloe office where he led Max Glendinning to his boardroom for a private meeting.

Glendinning placed a buff manila folder on the table in front of him and sat forward in his chair. The folder was plain, with no title or label and contained a number of photographs and several printed sheets.

'Your boy did well at the weekend conference,' Glendinning said.

'Noah has a bright future, Max.'

'Leadership?' Glendinning enquired.

'We could do a lot worse, Max. But we need to knock off the old boys' attitude in the East. They seem to think it's their party and we're the Cinderella.'

Glendinning emitted a short laugh. 'Well, good luck with that one Roger. That sort of talent needs looking after, though. How are plans?'

'I'm told there will be an immediate opening in Border Protection for a man of your experience. I've put your name forward and it was well received. And why not? LOTO wants you. It seems he is intent on pinching all my best people.'

Glendinning nodded. 'They need the best talent.'

Then he turned to the pages in his folder.

'Fremantle detectives will soon be charging Mahmoud Khalil with the murder of an unidentified person found in a wheelie bin in Hamilton Hill. Just thought you'd like to know that.' Lamord nodded his thanks. Glendinning continued. 'Unfortunately there's no sign of your missing girl. Fremantle detectives seem to be interested in talking to the same fellow your people were looking for earlier last week, though.' He placed several large, but grainy, prints on the table. 'This is a picture taken at an ATM in Market Street last Friday night. As you can see, they're a little grainy, but this is the guy known as Hunter — your people believe he's the one spirited your girl away.'

Lamord studied the images closely, one by one. 'Looks a bit familiar …'

'I'm not surprised,' Glendinning said, 'the detective leading the investigation also thought so. She had forensics run the image through some FRS' — facial recognition software — 'Turns out to be a guy named Calvin Bishop.'

'Bishop?' The name struck a chord. Lamord creased his brow in an effort to place it. 'The journalist?… Investigated Bondy?… I thought he died about ten years ago.'

'Lost at sea was the word,' Glendinning said. 'Poked his nose into an alleged drug racket run by Enzo Gordioni. Wouldn't have had much choice but to disappear once Gordo'd caught wind of it. But hiding among the homeless — I have to give him that — that is clever … a Gordioni would stay upwind of a homeless person.'

Lamord sniffed at the mental image and grimaced inwardly. He sympathised. Nothing blights the landscape like a beggar: an unsightly brown

smudge on a pristine postcard. Society would be better served if they were all be rounded up and put to work, pay their way.

In a measured and even tone, he asked, 'Do they know what caused the rockfall?'

'The fireys are still looking for traces of explosives … they think calcium nitrate may have been used and some water soluble agent, but it's hard to isolate because it's limestone … it's a matter of finding a spot that burnt hotter than the rest. In this case it's doubly difficult because water and electricity were both present and the forensics people can't tell in which order. Either this guy, Hunter — or Bishop — has the luck of the gods or he's resourceful.'

'Sean Dower says it was booby trapped with electrified water.'

'Sean Dower would be best advised to keep his bloody head down and his thoughts to himself. The investigation has confirmed that the space was lived in. Electricity was supplied from the old warden's cottage — the wiring was at least seventy years old. They also say water flowed through there from an underground source. It was originally part of the tunnel system that ran between the harbour and the gaol, but there have been collapses in the past and the city had put up grilles to bar access. I guess this Hunter found a way in and, if he's had ten years to work on it, he could have set up anything down there. All the same, the geologists reckon it's possible the cave in was a natural occurrence — it's happened before. Won't know definitely for a few months, though.'

A brief silence settled between them as Lamord stared out the window. The sun's rays striking laser-like bars through a bruised cloud bank rolling in from the west. At length he said, 'The girl still has to be found and dealt with. How sure are we that this fellow Hunter is hiding her somewhere?'

'Dower's boys and Codlin have done a top job, no question,' Glendinning replied. 'They found him and determined that he was the last person seen with her. But nothing ties his actions definitely to your search for her — he could easily have mistaken Dower's boys for Gordioni's goons — and maybe it's not a bad idea to float that thought.'

'But if he did get her into hiding,' he paused while he extracted another photograph from his folder, 'I need to tell you that he's not the worst of your problems.'

'A fucking poet?' Lamord looked across the table at Glendinning whose return gaze was dubious. Jesus! he thought, what is it with people like this? As though some hack writer can have any real influence on events under my control.

'Well in a manner of speaking,' Glendinning answered at length. 'Art Lazaar was a middle-weight entertainer in the eighties and nineties with something he called performance poetry — like a singer who can't sing, writing about social justice and political entanglements. He's a light-weight academic now, I guess if you can't do it, you teach it … know what I mean?'

'Yes, I know what you mean. But I don't see the issue — if he was never really anybody, and he's even less now, what's he got?'

'It might be more about what he hasn't got.'

'What hasn't he got?'

'Money. Fame. A wife. He's hardly even got a job from what I hear.'

'I don't get it.' Lamord's bewilderment was genuine. Glendinning allowed himself a laugh on the inside.

'Let's look at it this way, Roger. Who would you say is the most well-

known member of your party — the person most people think holds the power?'

'The premier, of course.'

'So … does he hold the power? The influence? Is he self preserved?'

'No, of course not.'

'Who does hold the power?'

'Here? In Western Australia?… I do.'

Glendinning took a beat. 'You do.' He nodded and sipped his water. 'But no-one knows that, do they? — by no-one, I mean Joe Public.'

Lamord looked directly into Glendinning's eyes, his face passive, accepting of the honour the other had afforded him. 'No of course not. That would be the quickest way to lose it.'

Glendinning, nodding his agreement, said, 'Art Lazaar was a journalist once. Then he turned to poetry and satire. When there's a sniff of official corruption, or when a whiff rises from an important theory teetering on the brink of collapse under the lobby mill, or a good cop under cover is threatened … somehow, he's there. There've been rumours about him for years. He appears like a ghost who walks a space between the law and the lawless and he digs in … he digs in, and he doesn't let go. He's worse than a fucking bobtail.

'So, what you need to understand, Roger, is no one knows how this guy knows what he knows, where he gets his information — or his instructions — from. It's weird. No one fronts for him — he doesn't have a premier — know what I mean?' Lamord nodded. 'And he's got nothing to lose.'

'Which university?'

'Sorry?'

Lamord rose in his seat and a flash of ice passed through his eyes. 'Which

university does he teach at?'

'Murdoch.'

'Good. The Vice Chancellor is a good friend of mine. This Art Lazaar is as good as gone.'

Glendinning sat back, thoughtful. 'I wouldn't bet on it, Roger. I'm telling you, this guy has a poetic licence that is outside of anyone's reach, yours included.'

Lamord rose from his chair and walked around the table. Glendinning rose as Lamord extended his hand and shook the other's. 'Thanks for coming Max.' He waited for Glendinning to gather his folder from the table and lift his coat from the back of his chair before guiding him towards the door. 'I think I'd like to meet this poet. I'll invite him to lunch.' He opened the door and ushered Glendinning through. 'And I would have thought that you, more than anyone, would know by now that nothing is beyond my reach.'

After escorting Glendinning to the lift, Lamord returned to the room and picked up the 10x8 from the table. He studied the image before him, looked directly into the eyes — clear, hazel in colour, with that little reflected square in the top near-side that is often—

'Mistaken for the window to the soul,' he murmured. He looked for a long time, and then came to a decision. 'A Columbian lunch for you, I think … yes, Columbian.'

He dropped the photograph onto the table and went to the bar and poured a glass of his own estate's finest Shiraz from a crystal decanter and took it back into his office, where he stood with it before the plate glass window and allowed the spicy black current and hint of cinnamon to fill his nostrils and whet his palate. As the black belt of clouds tightened its grip on the ocean before him,

an ancient refrain drifted into his mind.

At first it seemed a little speck,
And then it seemed a mist;
It moved and moved and took at last
A certain shape I wist.
A speck, a mist, a shape, I wist!
And still it neared and neared:
As if it dodged a water sprite,
It plunged and tacked and veered.

What poetry could you possibly have that stands up to those of the great seafarers, *Art Lazaar*? — if that is even your real name. You will know, first hand, tack and plunge, my friend; and you will veer on and return to a shape, a mist, a speck. And then you will veer out of sight. You will be no more. Fucking poets; who needs fucking poets?

He filled his mouth and let the wine flow across all the taste buds on his tongue, rolling it like a wave — forward and back, side to side. And then he swallowed.

He let the moment pass, reached for his phone and dialled a number. A voice answered.

'Yes, Enzo, please,' he said.

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17

Monday August 26 — 12 days before the election

Kelly Boulter was up at five after a restless night. She set out on her morning run into a bitter and miserable dark from her Como apartment in Lockhart Street, crossing the freeway and then the river at Canning Bridge before turning south along the Mount Pleasant foreshore. An icy wind barrelled up the Canning River. It drilled through her, spit fine shards of rain in her face as she ramped up into a spanking pace toward Mt Henry Bridge. She re-crossed the river along a dry path beneath the bridge and with the wind and rain now at her back pounded her way back to Canning Highway and home. The ten-and-a-half kilometres took just on thirty-five minutes, close enough to a record, and time enough to think on issues plaguing her mind.

A recent habit of Boulter's was to spend some of Sunday evening logged into Oasis, the Curtin University Learning Management System, where the credentials of an undercover legend gave her access to a wide range of student bulletin boards and topic discussions on the system's Blackboard. It was a way of following Lucas's progress and gave her an insight into his state of mind. She'd been pleased with his recent activities and discussions. But last night, when she tried, she was denied access. She had made several attempts, only to be advised that her credentials were not valid.

Normally this wouldn't be cause for concern, but something about the finality of the system message prickled the hairs on the back of her neck. It was that her *credentials* weren't valid, not that the system was somehow down and unavailable. *Her* credentials. According to COPs — the Covert Operations management team — the credentials she had been handed were foolproof. And even though the job had finished, she had managed to persuade a contact at COPs to keep the identity live on the pretence that there might be follow up

enquiries. It's not strictly legal, she'd been advised — could be cause for abuse of Government property — but they'd placed her university identity on a leave of absence, still enrolled, still *credentialled* beyond usual student access. She would check in with her contact later.

As she took control of her breathing and synchronised it to the rhythm of her footfall, her thoughts flipped through her case data as though her mind were a filing system of index cards, pausing on each mental image before slipping it back and bringing the next into focus. The wheelie bin murder was perplexing. As was the Parry Street explosion, from which two bodies had been recovered. Which meant, assuming that he was even there to begin with, that Hunter — or, as she was convinced, Calvin Bishop — was either still buried in the remaining rubble, or had escaped the blast and disappeared. Something he's good at, it seems. Interesting how the soldier's body had been claimed by his unit in double quick time, cremated and made news of by this Lamord Living Foundation — hardly seems time enough for the coroner to reach a conclusion and release the body. Amazing how money influences institutions. The coroner's report on Tor, the homeless lad, however, said he'd been electrocuted before being crushed. That needs more investigation. Nobody has come forward to claim that body.

The cards kept flipping. Interviews with Mahmoud Khalil had led to nothing. Said the victim was his friend. He had no identity papers. That was the deal: the transporters wouldn't take you if you did not destroy your papers. Talk to Yusuf, he said, he has my new papers. Who is Yusuf? Yusuf gave me the camera with the photo. What photo? Who is Yusuf? Yusuf knows who did this. What is your connection to the panel beaters shop? I help Channa sometimes. Yusuf arranged this. Who is Yusuf? Your fingerprints were found in the tow

truck. A green wheelie bin containing a body was transported on that tow truck. Do you want to tell us about that? I drive the truck to move vehicles around the yard. I don't know anything about a wheelie bin. I need to talk to Yusuf. Who is Yusuf?

The cards came and went quickly, in rhythm, and increasingly the cards that flipped through her mind had a purple triangle in the upper right corner. A triangle which grew more intense. Lazaar. Could Lazaar be the purple patch in all of this. The link to it all. Lazaar who betrayed me. Lazaar who I could have loved. Lazaar who knows something. Lazaar who taught me about the poetry of murder. Not that which rhymes, he'd said. More the way Aristotle thought of it — is it tragedy or comedy? Ari-fucken-stotle; Art La-fucken-zaar — that's poetry. It all depends on who's lying, and to whom.

Are you lying to me Mahmoud? I'm not lying. Ask Yusuf. Ask Channa. Who is Yusuf?

Maybe that's it, she thought as a blast of wind from behind brought a sudden shower that soaked her through. She pounded harder, focusing on her breathing, keeping it in rhythm. Rethink the poetry. By the time she reached home she had a plan for the day.

Kelly Boulter passed through the station security at eleven minutes past seven. Part One of the plan was to attack the objects that made up the evidence she had to hand. Even though she was sure the wheelie bin case was somehow linked to the Parry Street blast, she was determined to work systematically as though there were no such linkages. The networks would find their own paths if they are there to be found. Parry Street can be planted in a different patch for now.

She heard Lazaar's voice in her head as she entered the situation room and began to re-arrange the pieces on the board. *Drawing conclusions is for novelists. You know the conclusion, that's where you need to look back from — the* totum simul. *First is to decide whether it is tragedy or comedy.*

Jesus! Does he have to be everywhere?

To exorcise Lazaar's presence from her head, she sent a series of text messages and logged a calendar entry for a team briefing at 10:00. She intended to create a history of the murder from the end that she already knew, back to its beginning. Its narrative. A compression of time that she visualised from outside the events, standing like a general on a high ridge overseeing a campaign. A view of the objective throughline. The *totum simul*.

Boulter saw each material object present at any point along a timeline as belonging only to that object, with its own small story. The tendrils from those small stories generate the Narrative of God, from which she will come to understand motives, intentions and beliefs of those involved. Why did the wheelie bin get moved to that location? That *specific* location? No other location. That one. Why did the killer mix red paint with the victim's blood? To see all as a single, timeless whole is to see the way the material objects that make up the murder lie in relation to each other. No murder is a single event. This is what determines whether it is tragedy or comedy.

Tragedy, Lazaar told her, *is the story in which the liar is lying to himself; comedy that in which the liar is lying to everyone else*. So, what about you, Lazaar? Tragicom?

But, Lazaar's thinking is useful. Especially when it comes to piecing together the small stories that comprise the bigger narrative. Using a piece of

sophisticated timeline software, she began by creating three arcs: The wheelie bin, the body, and the paint — three items she saw as the primary objects. She assigned the main points to critical times along these, and then decided to add a master arc, the investigation, and another called locations. Each entry linked to detailed information held in IIS — the Incident Information System (pronounced 'eye-is', from which the headword *Police* had been dropped shortly after its introduction) — and established any relationships that may exist between the objects, events and actors. These last she divided into crime-involved and investigator.

At 9:30, she was interrupted by a call from a voice who identified himself as Agent Jones, from the AFP, Perth Crime Operations.

'Yes.' Boulter's response was a clear signal that she was being interrupted.

'I head the people-smuggling team here in Perth. Your boss has requested assistance relating to a suspect you're holding. Would you be willing to meet us over lunch today?'

'Us, Agent Jones?'

'Me and my partner, Agent Smith.'

'Smith and Jones?'

'That's right, Detective. You're holding a guy who says he is Mahmoud Khalil, right?'

'Why lunch?'

'Because it's sensitive. Balsamic and Olives, one o'clock.'

The line went dead.

Boulter tapped the details into her calendar and went back to her task, determined to have the picture as complete as possible by ten, and any questions

about missing information or holes in the narrative clear and highlighted.

The team filed in a few minutes before the appointed time. McPherson was the last. He handed Boulter a piece of paper.

'Before close of business today, lass.' The instruction was clear, but she wasn't to be side-tracked. She noted the Police insignia on its header, folded it without looking further and stuffed it under the cover of her daybook.

The projectors were on, directed in high resolution to two interactive smart boards that covered a good part of one wall. Her timeline of mapped events projected onto one screen, its relationship lines extending between entries like coloured rhizomes. It was impressive.

She clicked on the wheelie bin entry and a point-cloud image of the crime scene appeared in 3D night-vision green on the second screen, a laser scan of the site generated by the FFOs — Forensic Field Officers — who attended.

'Okay. The wheelie bin …' Boulter used a laser pointer to identify objects on the screen as she talked. 'On Friday the second, at six-thirty a.m., the bin was found at the verge, of 23 Morrison Street, Hamilton Hill, here … by Carlos Chavez, resident. Mister Chavez had returned from his night shift at Henderson where he works as a welder in a shipbuilding yard. His rubbish collection usually occurs at about seven-thirty on a Friday and it's his habit, when he's on night shift, to put the bin out when he gets home. He saw this bin as he drove in and thought his wife may have already done it, which, if that were so, he says, was very unusual. But when he parked his car up the driveway, here' — her laser pointed to the ghostly point-cloud image of the rear of a vehicle in the upper right corner — 'their bin was still by the back door. He took his bin

out and then looked into this one and saw a plastic sheet. When he lifted the top of it, he discovered the feet of a body that had been placed head first in the bin. To avoid them being collected, Mister Chavez then moved both his bin and this one back from the curb, here' — she moved her pointer beam as though drawing a pathway — 'to where they are, here. His call to Fremantle Police is logged on *eye-is* at six-forty-six. He remained at the front of his property with the bins until local police arrived at seven oh-eight. FOS officers determined that they were dealing with a suspicious death; they cordoned off a ten metre buffer, set up and manned an RVP.'

Boulter paused and scanned the room. Noting that she hadn't lost anyone yet, she ploughed on.

'Forensics have established that the bin was moved to this location with the body inside sometime between midnight and six-thirty. This assumes a possible overlap of two hours in the time of transportation with the time of the murder. The bin was stolen from David Grays in O'Connor sometime between nine a.m. Monday twenty-ninth of July and three-thirty in the afternoon of Thursday the first of August. A delivery driver reported it missing from his delivery. Each bin has a unique serial number, which is allocated to an address prior to delivery, as shown on this manifest' — an image of a document appeared next to the crime scene image.

'So the driver dumped it somewhere on his way?' Robinson was the team cynic, useful for looking at the extremes of human behaviour with a touch of wry humour.

'I suppose that's a possibility, Andy,' Boulter rejoined. 'But let's not jump the gun here. The only fingerprints recovered from the bin are those of Mister

Chavez, and they correspond with his descriptions of his actions. His right-hand prints are on the lid handle, his left-hand on the lip at the middle front, his right hand again on both the plastic inside and the right-side dragging handle which he used to move the bin.' She clicked a button on her pointer, and circled each of these locations in the image as she spoke, leaving a visible notation. The image refocused on the bin, lower down and tracked around to its rear. 'There are rub marks down here' — again pointing — 'which I'll come back to in a minute. And there is dog urine splashed on this lower left corner. Mister Chavez confirms a dog walked past the bin while he was waiting for the police to arrive and lifted its leg before he could shoo it off.'

Boulter paused once again, and looked around the room. 'Now, the Super wants us to wrap this thing up by Friday' — she caught McPherson's eye and imperceptible nictation — 'so are there any questions so far?'

Robinson jumped in again. 'I'd say there are holes in this that could hide an aircraft carrier. No prints. No identity for either victim or perp. This is no ordinary murder, boss.' This last was directed at McPherson.

'Quite,' Boulter said, drawing focus back to her. 'So we'll work methodically through everything we do have and then dig around your aircraft carrier holes' — a beat — 'that okay with you?' A grin and a nod from Robinson. 'First the theft of the bin. Baxter what have we learned?'

'Yeah Sarge. Tom Procter, the truck driver' — referring to his notes — 'I interviewed him Thursday the eighth, here, at nine a.m. Had a union-supplied lawyer with him. He can't explain the missing bin. Says, when the truck is loaded, the manifest is checked by the company's stores clerk. His manifest accounts for thirty-six bins aboard, all destined for Armadale City depot. He didn't count

them, he assumed the count to be correct. So there is a possibility the clerk made an error, either in the count or on the manifest. I talked to her on site a couple of days earlier. It's hard to see how she could have made a mistake; she checks the serial numbers in batches set aside, and then re-counts them on board. It's pretty thorough, accountants would call it double entry.' He flashed a knowing look at Robinson, and continued.

'But there is something interesting. Procter says he was stopped at the intersection of North Lake Road and Winterfold shortly after leaving the depot by two plain clothes police officers in an unmarked white Toyota. He was instructed to pull into the lane that leads to McBeth Way and given a drug test. He tested positive for cannabis, and was detained in the unmarked vehicle, supervised by one officer while the other searched his truck. No infringement was issued. No incident was logged on *eye-is*.'

'So, was he stoned?' McPherson asked.

'He says he had a joint before he went to work. If that's the case he probably wasn't shit-faced — likes to cruise, he reckoned. Apparently he had another joint stashed in the truck for later — claims the cop who did the search took it.'

'Did he give you a description of these cops?'

'Couple of big blokes around mid-thirties, though one a little older than the other, heavier and shorter. The taller one searched the truck while the other one kept him in the back of the car, standing outside and talking on a mobile phone. They didn't question him other than to identify him and then, after administering the test, ask when he'd had a smoke. The taller of the two showed him some ID when they approached the truck, but it was pretty cursory,

he says. He couldn't recall them giving names and was pretty sketchy on their details. The car had a portable roof-top blue, in-dash comms, and system-locked doors. About all I could establish was that they both had buzz-cut hair styles, although he thought the shorter one seemed to be balding a bit. Both had under-shoulder sidearms.'

Robinson gave a low whistle. 'An aircraft carrier's looking a mite small right now, gov.'

Boulter glared. 'Well then, Detective, perhaps you can do some actual detecting and find out if they were real cops without firm identity, or fake cops in a real car, or fake cops in a fake car?' She took in the other faces in the room. 'Do we assume that the wheelie bin was removed from the truck by the cop — fake or real — at this pull-over?'

'That's certainly one possibility,' Baxter replied. 'Of course, as Robbo suggests, Procter could have dumped a bin and fed us this story. We'll have a better idea after boy wonder here has checked his financials and background. If anything shows up we'll pull him in for further questioning.'

'Okay, let's move on,' Boulter said, glancing at the wall clock. 'I just want to briefly touch on two other things about the bin. The first is the grease found in the treads of the left wheel. FFOs have matched that to some grease on the back of a tow truck owned by the Scratch'n'Match panel shop in O'Connor' — an image of the truck appeared on screen, Boulter's laser highlighting a grubby splotch near the winch. 'They also found some plastic scrapings matching the bin extrusion on the edge of the rear platform of the truck. This accounts for this tiny scrape mark down the back of the bin. So, we can say that the bin was

definitely transported, with the weight of the body in it, on the back of this tow truck. Whoever drove the truck that night, is responsible for dumping the body.

'The second is where the mystery is. Before being used to store a murdered body and four litres of red paint, the bin was thoroughly cleaned with an industrial cleaner, inside and out. There are absolutely no fingerprints or other marks that would under normal circumstances be found on a new wheelie bin shipped to David Grays, processed by their stores personnel, loaded on a truck and removed from the truck. None. On top of that, two domestic shower curtains were used to line the inside of the bin, and they too have no fingerprints.' She looked at Parker. 'Ben, you have a theory about this?'

'Yes, I think so.' Parker took the remote control from Boulter and clicked on an entry on the time line. 'FFOs identified the solvent as a product manufactured by ICC, used in most engineering and panel beating shops. It's a compound known as 571-B, odourless and potent, petroleum based for use in low-pressure sprayers and manually removing minute residues of grease and dirt. They use it in the paint booth to thoroughly prepare a surface, and again after painting. It's a specialist chemical and has to be mixed correctly for the application. I rather feel the perpetrator in this case knows his chemicals and is very comfortable using them.

'I'd like to fill in some of the missing details' — he clicked on the timeline arc labelled *paint* — 'maybe shrink Robbo's aircraft-carrier hole a bit—'

'Senior Detective Constable Robinson to you, son,' Robinson growled.

Parker was unfazed. 'Yeah, whatever. Anyway, the wheelie bin was completely lined by two domestic shower curtains purchased from a Bunnings or a Coles store — they both stock them, but there's no way of knowing which shop

they actually came from. It contained a human body that had been completely bled, five or so litres of blood from that person, and about four litres of red paint. Forensics ascertained the presence of blood mixed with the paint using an initial luminol sweep. The question then became how much was blood and how much was paint and which went in first. The weight of the body was sixty-eight kilograms, the volume of blood, five point two litres, and a few mils shy of four litres of red automotive paint was poured in after the victim had bled dry. It is our contention that the paint was used to obscure the forensic investigation, mask blood odour and possibly to give the outward appearance of a domestic clean-up. It was the paint, though, that led us to the murder scene.

'This batch of paint is for red Mini Cooper cars and was formulated by Dulux in O'Connor in late June. It had been supplied to three different panel beating shops, including this one' — another image on the screen — 'Scratch'n'Match at the end of Mooney Place, also in O'Connor. This was identified on August twelfth, and we sealed these premises as the likely murder scene the following day. The tow truck that Sergeant Boulter referred to was also found at that site.'

Parker brought up a series of photogrammetry reconstruction images of a section of the panel beater's workshop, including a floor plan and interior layout showing car bays, hoist machinery, the paint section and the access way through wide doors in the rear of the premises.

'The chemical cleaning wasn't just applied to the bin. While the solvent carrier dissipates into the atmosphere, molecular trace elements remain and the FFOs established that this floor area in the paint booth was thoroughly cleaned, as was the under-section and tray top of the tow truck. There is a chain hoist

here, and the chain on this was also cleaned. It appears our victim was transported here from elsewhere. FFOs found German shepherd fibres on his clothing in places that indicate he was lying on his left side; fibres transferred from another surface, most likely car carpet. There are no traces of anything from this floor, and there are no traces of dog in this site, so it's reasonable to assume that the fibre transfer occurred during transportation. The absence of the fibres on any other part of his clothing would rule out him being in friendly contact with the dog. The chain link marks on his ankle match this chain' — another image overlay showing a tie chain hanging from the hoist shackle — 'It was looped around each ankle and then locked into this shackle, and he was hoisted up. We then believe the tow truck was reversed in here' — the new image, showing an inverted, hoisted, body and the tow truck, moved through 180 degrees to show locations and relationships of objects — 'with the wheelie bin placed on its tray. He was lowered into the wheelie bin, the curtains used to limit blood spatter, and his throat was cut from behind. Once he had bled out, the paint was poured down the sides of the curtains and the body lowered into the bin, which was then carted away and dumped.'

'Doesn't add up,' Robinson said after a moment's thought.

'What doesn't?' Parker asked.

'All this cleaning.'

McPherson chipped in. 'Well, Laddie, this guy obviously didn't want to leave any traces. He was thorough.'

'Yeah, my point precisely,' Robinson retorted. 'Everything … except for one little grease spot.' He leapt from his chair, took a red marker, circled the grease spots on the truck and wheelie bin and drew a connecting line between

them.

Rhizome, Boulter thought, and then she said: 'Your point?'

'It's a setup. This was meant to be found.' Robinson let the silence fall like leaves in a gentle spring breeze. 'Look, I have to say … this reads like a very thorough and professional operation, meticulously planned and executed' — he took a beat to allow the pun to register; it didn't — 'but I'm struggling to see how the perp we've got in custody fits. I can't see this being done by one guy. Not only one guy, but a guy without identity, which means without a driving licence.… Can anyone here see how a guy with this level of planning is going to put it at risk by driving without a licence?'

'Maybe he had a false one ready to go, just in case,' Baxter offered.

'Again … it doesn't fit,' Robinson countered. 'If he has, why has he not offered it since being taken into custody?'

'One of those aircraft carrier sized holes?' Boulter asked. Then she turned to McPherson. 'Sir, perhaps you would like to comment?'

McPherson grew uncomfortable, put on the spot. He narrowed his eyes and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Here we go, Boulter thought, bullshit at F1 speed.

'I believe, Sergeant Boulter, that you are meeting with Federal investigators later today?' Definitely a question — one Boulter thought best ignored. McPherson continued. 'They have substantial evidence that puts Khalil in the frame, and are now in a position to make it available to us. I apologise that this couldn't be done earlier, but this is a sensitive operation and involves multiple agencies and we need to be certain that everything here is done by the book. I'm certain your concerns will be addressed.'

'Still,' Robinson said, 'This guy's either got serious resources or he's a fucking superman.'

'We think his resources might be substantial and spread around,' McPherson said. 'What about ownership of this panel beaters, Andy?'

Robinson consulted his notes. 'Well, thereby hangs a tale. The business is run by a guy called Channa Ranatunga, a Sri Lankan immigrant who came as a refugee in two thousand and three. He's employed by the company through a local commercial law firm who act for the owners, whose identities, they point out, they are not obliged to share with us. It's a holding company registered in Panama. Ranatunga receives his salary and instructions through the law firm and reports to them. The land where the business is situated is held freehold by another company, also registered in Panama, also administered by the same law firm. The same goes for the block at the end of the cul-de-sac and the next one along, which houses a small mosque.

'In Ranatunga's statement, he advises that Mahmoud Khalil is known to him, and that he sometimes comes to the panel shop to help out — usually after prayers on a Friday. It's not regular and he does not have keys to the premises. We have interviewed all of Ranatunga's employees, and they can all verify their whereabouts on the night in question. So, if Mahmoud is our man, where did he get his keys and how did he do it?'

Another silence, this one longer and heavier.

'Has Khalil given us anything?' Boulter asked.

Robinson again consulted his notes. 'Three things. First he says he is innocent and was a friend of the victim; second he is on a bridging visa from Christmas Island in the care of a guy he says is called Yusuf; and third, that the

victim has a sister who has gone missing and our guy has grave fears for her. None of these things can we confirm. There is no record of a Mahmoud Khalil receiving a bridging visa — in fact Immigration have no record of him at all, his fingerprints are not on file, his face is not on file, his DNA is not on file. Nor can we locate an asylum seeker settlement agent called Yusuf. He doesn't have a last name for Yusuf, so we don't have a last name for him, he's a ghost. As for the sister — who knows?'

Boulter seized the moment. 'Okay, we'll leave it there and see what the feds have to say. Andy, see if you can get hold of the lawyer who's looking after the panel shop and get whoever it is in here. Parker, get on to forensics and dig into the wound, there must be something about the murder weapon, the angle from which the cut was applied … something. Anything. Baxter, get that truck driver back in, I want to be sure two cops pulled him over. Find them, if they exist. Also, get back out to the crime scene area and check again to see if anyone saw a tow truck that night. We are missing something here.'

18

I'm back in a workshop with my third-year class, a follow-on from my discussion with Ricard Koffi about suspense, partly because I wanted to explore how he was making progress, but also to share the discussion with the rest of the class. He hasn't shown up, however, and I find that unusual and mildly disturbing.

'I want to talk about the *tension gap*,' I am saying, 'but to get to that, we need to understand something of the *fictive dream*, a concept introduced by John Gardner and also discussed by Frey. Gardner talks about how a writer sees characters moving around their rooms, hunting through cupboards, glancing irritably through their mail, setting mousetraps, loading pistols … all fully imagined in a way to provide a fix on the action and seeing made-up people doing things. The fictive dream is the effect you want your reader to experience.'

There's a student at the front, incredulous, it appears. 'So, what?… the writer's imagination gets the reader so absorbed in the narrative that they experience the character's pangs of remorse, feel their guilt, experience their doubts and misgivings, and take sides in the decisions they are forced to make?'

'Yes. Your last point is critical. Stories move along by actions characters take to either get something or prevent another character getting it. When you're writing these moments, if you anguish over a character's decisions and actions, you have a good chance a reader will too.'

'So the tension gap is played out between writer and reader?'

'Maybe between character and reader. To have readers in the fictive dream state, they need to believe that the events around your character could be real. You do this by exposing them to emotion-provoking details that personally help explore the antagonism the character is experiencing. Readers can see themselves experiencing the same emotions under similar circumstances.

If you've experienced those emotions and use details and triggers that produce them for you, then you pass that identification on to your reader, they feel a sympathy for your character that extends into support for their cause. Your reader wants your character to reach their goals — otherwise they'll have closed the book already.'

'Isn't the issue of readers identifying with characters where they become *alike*? The reader alters behaviour to mimic that of characters?' This time it's Garry, our resident psychology major.

'You mean like cos play, or Harry Potter parties?' Laura asks him.

'Something like that,' he replies. 'But I've also read that true identification can't happen if the affective state of the reader is different from that of the character. So if the reader knows more than the character, they can't identify.'

These are good points, I tell them. 'But tension requires a gap to exist between what the character knows and what is already revealed to the reader, producing a sensation of genuine fear for the plight of the character. This is beyond both simply liking a character, or being like a character, so identification has a part to play, but it's not the whole story.'

We continue the discussion to explore how the transfer of an emotional state must drive the writer during the act. The truth is, I've found it difficult to convince people who haven't done much writing that this is entirely necessary, so I tell a little 'Spy vs Spy' type story about a ticking bomb beneath a table where two people are dining to illustrate my point.

'Imagine that a murder has been committed to prevent certain information coming to light,' I say, drawing a box on the white board and marking it TENSION GAP. 'Someone witnesses the event and can identify the actual

killer, and he decides to meet secretly with a detective investigating the crime. This someone is our protagonist and, for reasons he prefers to keep to himself, is very nervous about any contact with the police. But information of the proposed meeting leaks out and word gets back to the perpetrators and they decide the best way to deal with this is to set an explosive device under the table where the informant and the detective are seated.

'The protagonist's desire is to unburden himself from the knowledge of what he saw. He hopes this will set himself free from fear of being hunted by the killers. The leaking of this information may even be the first the killers are aware that there is a witness, the protagonist doesn't necessarily know that, although the reader does. But the stakes are so high that the killers can't afford for either the witness or the detective to survive. How the protagonist came to be there to witness the murder is a secret known only to him: he has a hidden need to keep this secret, for if it gets out, it would make matters worse, and that would be something of a worry.

'You can see there are a number of conflicts at play, all driven by the protagonist's desire to unburden himself,' — I scrawl an arrow marked DESIRE pointing to the graphic — 'we have his hidden need driving an inner conflict, there is a personal conflict arising from his mistrust of police, and there is the risk of exposure in an open public space' — four arrows feeding in from the bottom, labelled OPPOSITION — 'and of course the central conflict between the protagonist, his will to stay alive, and the antagonist's will to prevent him from spilling the beans. This central conflict has been brewing for some time for the reader and this moment is where it is being brought to a head, perhaps for the first time.

'Now, there's an expectation here that the outcome of this situation will change the circumstances for our protagonist.' I draw a dotted-line arrow from the top of the box up and to the right, leading to the future. I then ask them to consider for a moment the possible outcomes, write notes, discuss. Three minutes later I call for responses. They are random and come from around the room. I do my best to note them on the board and keep up.

— the bomb goes off, everyone dies

— the bomb goes off, he survives, the cop dies

— he discovers the bomb and throws it away and it goes off and kills the bad guys

— he discovers the bomb just in time and defuses it

— he sees the bomb and tells everyone to run, not everyone survives

— someone else sees the bomb and yells for people to run

— the bad guy's girlfriend suddenly appears in the restaurant, he has to race in and defuse the bomb

I call it to a halt and then say, 'Okay, let's consider how some of these alter the circumstances. If the bomb goes off and everyone dies, that's the end of the story, there is no new reality for the protagonist, the tension gap closes. On the other extreme, he throws the bomb away and it kills the bad guys also closes the tension gap, because now he's free, his new reality meets full expectations, but transformation of the character is unlikely to happen. The question, for me at least, is what outcome would be most effective in putting his hidden need to the test? That's where the moral, rational and trust dimensions of his desire are likely to be raised in the reader's consciousness.

'Discovering the bomb and yelling for everyone to run, but not everyone

survives invokes a new reality for our protagonist. He now knows for certain that he is not safe, but his secret is now the cause of much greater pain and suffering.' I draw another dotted arrow from the top of the box marking a feedback loop back to the desire, and label it NEW REALITY. 'If the bomb goes off and the cop dies, but he survives, that would result in a widening tension gap, and one that might alter his desire: he might no longer want to unburden himself, but to exact revenge, which changes the conflicts feeding in to the tension gap.' I add another dotted arrow toward the future and label it ALTERED DESIRE.

I study the class, again wondering where Ricard Koffi might be, watching them model my graphic of the tension gap in their notes. I summarise. 'The gap widens in the reader's story mind when the conflict is testing a moral ambiguity to which the reader has developed a passionate interest. It narrows when that moral ambiguity looks like it might be resolved. The same is true when issues of trust and rationality are contested.'

19

As it transpired, and to some relief, Smith and Jones were rather entertaining company. Boulter arrived at Balsamic & Olives a minute or two before the appointed time and mounted the steps toward the main entrance. A tall gaunt-looking man with a deep olive complexion guided her to a table — the only one occupied — from which two men were rising. A man with a close-cropped haircut around a receding hairline, perhaps in his late thirties, dressed in well fitted jeans, white sneakers and a red polo shirt under a dark grey zip-up sweater, smiled in the way people who have recognised others tend to do. She'd never seen him before.

'Detective Sergeant Boulter,' he said, extending his hand. 'Good of you to come.'

The other person, a tall, disarmingly good-looking man — square jawed, short cropped light coloured hair, also wearing well fitted jeans and sneakers, and a smile that emphasised his eyes — extended his hand for her to shake. He appeared a few years younger than his partner, but, as Boulter puzzled afterwards, it could only be appearance.

'Smith or Jones?' she asked, taking his hand and feeling a warm, confident comfort as it enveloped hers. She allowed the grip to linger just a moment longer.

'I'm Smith, he's Jones.' He let go, though it felt to her as if he did so with some regret.

'Smith and Jones … Alias, right?'

Jones laughed. Clearly not the first time he'd heard it. 'No, they're actually our real names. I'm Ross, he's another Kelly, like you. Is it okay if we call you that? He can keep Smith.'

Boulter took the seat that Smith had pulled out, gesturing toward the

room as she did. 'So, where are all the people?'

'Ah,' Jones replied, 'This place is closed to the public on Mondays. But our boss has a special relationship with the owner. It's useful, we still get great treatment, but a place for very private conversations.' The thin, olive-skinned man approached the table. 'This is Milorad,' Jones continued, 'he's going to look after things for us.'

'Indeed, sir,' Milorad said, his south-eastern European accent lilting above his words. 'As you know, Mondays are only for ve'ry private affairs, hmm? So we 'ave lighter offerings than other days. The lady prefers vegetables, I think, and you sir' — directing his glance at Smith — 'I think 'ave a taste for warmer meats. We 'ave for you a special Spanish flavour, hmm?' And he proceeded to unveil what was about to be served.

Boulter opted for water, Smith made his the soda variety with a splash of Angostura which arrived with a twist of lime on top. Jones took an Alhamra Mezquita, a fine Catalonian beer, Milorad said, complimenting him on his choice.

A waiter arrived with a collection of appetisers, including diced bread with grapes and chopped winter melon, bell pepper *excalivada* and a chef's special of *garbanzo* beans.

''Tis Malaga brought 'ere to you, to excite your palette, hmm,' Milorad purred, as he placed Boulter's napkin across her thighs. 'To prepare for Ramon's famous *Couseila*, a ve'ry aromatic dish of couscous paella with dried rose buds and white and purple grapes flown in fresh from Cap Bon, and *deglet nour* dates from Tunisia. You will enjoy, hmm? Buen provecho.'

'This is very flash, boys,' Boulter said, watching the maitre de's back disappear toward the kitchen, and reaching for a stuffed capsicum. 'But why all

the cloak and dagger? And where the hell did they get that guy from?'

'Hong Kong, I believe,' Smith replied. 'Word is, he knows every taste there is to know and precisely what happens when they are combined. But we're here, Detective Sergeant, because the discussion we're about to have must be kept between us. This room is more secure than either your office or ours. More money changes hands, more lives are influenced, more deals cemented as a consequence of conversations in this room that anyplace else in this state. It is swept daily for bugs and even though you don't see it, there is more security protecting our privacy here than the Premier's office. If a conversation were taking place at that table over there' — pointing — 'you wouldn't hear it here.'

Boulter smiled. 'Cone of silence, huh?'

'Something like that. A bit more technologically advanced though.'

'Okay, I'll buy,' Boulter said, bringing a frown to her brow and fixing a cool stare on Smith. 'What are we talking about?'

It was Jones who began, leaving Smith watching Boulter. 'It's a privilege to meet you, Kelly,' he said, with a little more heart than she imagined he really felt. 'We don't get much opportunity to meet officers we hear great things about. And we've heard great things about you, right Smith?'

'Great things,' Smith confirmed.

This wasn't the conversation Boulter had been expecting. And when she reflected on it afterwards, she struggled to recall all that they talked about. They touched on mutual friends and colleagues. The challenges of covert operations, how blame gets reapportioned when things go wrong. Smith seemed to know people Boulter knows, but perhaps Smith knew them better than they knew

him. He'd spoken to those who could vouch for her integrity — as a police officer who could be trusted. He knows of her problem of promotion denied, or deferred as he claimed it was put to him.

'Some among your establishment don't appreciate officers who do great things,' Jones said, waving for another Alhamra Mezquita. 'We have the same problem in our organisation. It gets to a point where you don't know who to trust. We think we can trust you.'

'It seems as though you've landed an unsolvable case,' Smith added. And then, with a knowing grin, 'Although it's not something altogether unfamiliar.'

'Our pitch, if you like' — Jones reclaiming the narrative — 'is to help you regain that lost ground by giving you what's needed to land a result. But, as you might appreciate, we also need a result. Different business, same people.'

'Sounds familiar,' Boulter said. Smith and Jones both gave knowing laughs. 'But, I don't get it. I've got a murder case. Where do you guys fit?'

'Your perp,' Smith said. 'Mahmoud Khalil—'

'Alleged.'

'Right. Although once we've shown you ours I think you'll find you've got the right one. Then, of course, you show us yours and—'

'Wait. Wait.' Boulter held a hand up. 'You show me yours, I show you mine … what the fuck is that all about? What have I got to show you?'

Jones adopted a soothing, gentler tone. 'Kelly, I realise this is all coming a bit out of left field right now, but if you let us get to it, I'm sure you will see how this pans out for all of us. You do have knowledge of things that affect our investigation, even if you don't realise it right now.'

Deja vu rose from the pits of Boulter's stomach, flooding her bowel

with a sudden urge to excuse herself. She fought it. Re-centred herself. It was clear to her that Jones did not want her to raise clarifying questions. Not at this point at any rate. Smith was to have the floor, to paint the picture, to spell it out, as it were. True, he was sat back in his chair, hands clasped like a preacher's before him in-between moments of transporting morsels from plate to mouth, his voice adjusted for their interpersonal distance, paced evenly, giving pauses where pauses were required, punctuated by the distant clinking of Jones's cutlery. Smith had the preacher's way and Boulter was ensnared within its cadence. He was painting a picture of an impending crisis, starting with the ghosts of the Tampa and rising to today's heights of people smuggling. Your man is evidence of its new dimension.

'He is Hazari from Afghanistan,' Smith went on in the same endearing tone, 'one of those Tampa ghosts, a child thrown overboard, rescued and brought safely to shore by our good men and women, fed and sheltered on Christmas Island by the generosity of the Australian people, and in two thousand and eleven among the first to be granted a bridging visa into the community. His visa was sponsored by an agency for refugees and among the seventeen others in his group to be offered bridging visas were brother and sister, Ishmail and Falullah Salim. We believe Ishmail is your wheelie bin victim.'

Isha, Boulter thought, Mahmoud called him Isha, said he was his friend, said he was innocent, he did not kill his friend, he does not know who killed him. He has no papers, he says Yusuf keeps them. What will Smith and Jones make of Yusuf?

'We've had an interest in Mahmoud Khalil for some time, we think he has unsavoury links. He prays in a mosque in O'Connor and spends some time

in a panel beating shop a couple of doors down run by a Bangladeshi — Channa Ranatunga — who came here as a refugee from Sri Lanka. He has dubious links with Islamist militant groups stretching all the way from Bangladesh through Pakistan and Afghanistan. We have people inside watching, and Khalil came to our attention. A forensic examination of where he lives turned up several items of interest — some of interest to us and some of interest to you. What we are about to give you proves that Mahmoud Khalil murdered your wheelie bin victim — a gruesome souvenir photo of the crime, clothes and shoes with the victim's blood on them, and the knife used to cut his throat. Of course there were additional items of interest to our other investigations. Our boss thought it best for your boss to arrest Khalil on suspicion of murder, that way no suspicion is thrown onto ongoing covert work. And, of course, because Khalil has no identity documents, you can hold him without charge. The evidence box is in our car, we'll sign that over to you when you leave.'

'So, I guess we're counting on you, Kelly.' Jones picked up the pitch. 'We need to protect our covert ops, but get this guy put away for his crime. It has to be done reasonably quietly … you see?'

'I think so,' Boulter said, feeling that she'd been fed, but the really tasty morsel withheld. Still no mention of Yusuf.

Jones leaned his right forearm on the table and titled towards her. 'Has Khalil mentioned anyone else?'

Ah, fishing. Casting the line. Leaving the fly floating. Dominant male. Boulter decided to shift the conversation and trap them on contentious ground. 'It's all very difficult, Ross. You see our man — who you say is Mahmoud Khalil — has no identity papers. We can't confirm who either he, or you, says he is.

If, as you say' — nodding toward Smith — 'he holds a bridging visa then there would be immigration papers, his fingerprints and DNA samples would be on the national databases. They're not. This guy we've arrested, doesn't exist, and nor does his so-called victim. Any defence lawyer is going to shoot that down with a bloody big cannon. At least if we are going to prosecute this guy, we have to be able to prove who he is, and what his relationship to his victim is. I presume you have that proof?'

A look passed between the two men. 'I'm sure we can produce the visa with photo ID,' Jones said.

'What do you know about our vic, then?' Boulter pressed. 'Can you lay your hands on papers to confirm his identity too? We know nothing about him either.'

'That might be a little more difficult. I'm sure Khalil destroyed anything that identified Salim. But, I'm sure we will have something. Of course you need to hand over the sister to us.'

'I don't know anything of a sister.'

'The sister?…' Smith resumed, a non-challenging tone, 'Surely Mahmoud has mentioned that he was in love with the sister?' — first name now, curious — 'that he fought with Ishmail over this?… She knows this, and she's on the loose out there. You see, Kelly, we know about the girl. We know you know, we know you've been in contact with those hiding her, we know you know where she's hidden. She's a crucial link in our investigation, but out there — she could put good men and women in danger, send the whole thing down the river … best if she were left to us. I'm sure you understand.'

'I understand, but I don't know the girl. I don't know her whereabouts.'

'You've been undercover, Kelly?' Jones again. 'Of course you have, down south, you pretended to be the girlfriend of some bikey drug punk … Kathleen Baker, was it?'

How …? Boulter wondered.

Smith interrupted: 'That was the job Bob Prichard got gunned down on, wasn't it? A cock up I heard … sad when a good cop gets shot up by the bad guys … still, happens, right?… Well the thing is, we have to catch the bad guys. See the problem is these boats, there's too many of them … this government's opened the gates and we're getting swarms, more than we can handle, so the boats have to be stopped. That's why we've got the Channa Ranatungas and the Mahmoud Khalils. These guys do not have our national interest at heart. You're with me, right? The girl's an illegal, we can't leave her out there — she's gotta be brought back in.'

'Wish I could help you boys, but I know nothing about the girl.'

Smith screwed up his face. Boulter was surprised that even with such contortion, it was still very attractive. 'Yeah Kelly, I don't think you're telling us everything there,' he said.

Bingo! Ground of contention, boys. Let's see who gets out unscathed. 'So here we are, the you show me yours and I'll show you mine bit?'

Jones looked genuinely perplexed. 'Sorry! Kelly, we've given you all of ours. It's your turn now.'

Boulter was not quite as contrite as they appeared to have hoped. 'Don't think so, Ross. As I see it, I've got the door, probably the hinges and the latch too, but I don't have the key, do I?'

'The key?'

'I believe his name is Yusuf.'

Boulter might have reasonably expected the conversation to be abruptly halted at this point, but Jones, with a little more sharpness than he intended, simply said, 'We need Yusuf to stay put.'

Perhaps Smith felt the edge in Jones's voice, and perhaps felt the need to reset the tone, to put it right again.

'What Ross means is that Yusuf is an important thread in our investigation. We've got big fish sniffing at the line, people smuggling is doing ripe business here and if we inadvertently uproot Yusuf, it could spoil the whole thing. A lot of work has gone into this, years in fact, and we've got assets in play all over the shop, walking the ground up there in Indon and Malaysia, expensive assets in dangerous places moving among the movers, shaking among the shakers, getting in place to shut the traffickers down. If we shake this tree too soon, bad fruit's gonna fall.'

This time, Boulter's need to know was not as easily assuaged as they had hoped it would be.

'Forgive me,' she began, 'but I don't really call all the shots on this one. You will need to give me a little more because I'm going to have to go back to my Super, as you know he's the one who signed the warrant application — it's his name on the chute and I don't see him taking kindly to a push that sends him down the void, could be shit at the other end. Mahmoud Khalil, as you can imagine, protests his innocence and insists we talk with Yusuf. It would certainly be good to get this fellow Yusuf's version of events.'

'I doubt Yusuf has a version of events,' Smith said, with his little smile. 'Yusuf is simply the person who provides bridging visa support. But your boss,

McPherson, he's happy with this version, happy to proceed on the basis of what we've told you and the evidence we have for you. He's confident the prosecutors will have no problem with it, after all you've got a murder weapon, blood and clothing to match, and a pretty damning photograph. Your part is to give us the girl.'

Smith's inflection left this as a question; Boulter left it hanging unanswered for so long Smith might have wondered whether she grasped it. The problem was not so much as whether she grasped it, but how far over the fire she might leave Art Lazaar dangling. He definitely knew where the girl was.

'So, let me get this clear,' she said, caution sounding loud in her inner ear, 'I get this incontrovertible evidence against Mahmoud Khalil that he did in fact commit this murder, even though we don't know how he did it, we can prove that he did it?' — Jones nodded as though following her train — 'We don't get to confirm any of it with this Yusuf character, but you will provide us with the missing identity information that we might otherwise have got from him.' Another nod. 'And in exchange for this, I give you the victim's missing sister.'

'That's about it,' Jones confirmed.

In the end, Boulter was not at odds with herself as she left, although she was tempted to ask — and bit her tongue on the impulse — whether Smith and Jones had veered towards Kardinya in their investigative travels. The evidence box she signed for had been retrieved by Smith from the boot of a white Toyota Aurion and the haircuts and build were close enough to the truck driver's descriptions.

'Office car?' she asked taking the box under her wing.

'It's what we get,' Jones offered. 'Fortunately, he drives.'

The cry of pain she felt driving away mixed with a shout of pleasure. There was something worthwhile about the thought of sticking it to Art Lazaar, although she believed she had limited the potential of damage only to his character and not to threaten the lives of others who had placed their welfare under his care. He needed needling. Ever since his re-emergence in this case, she felt the weight of his moral force pushing her in directions she had not wanted to go, yet his sleight of hand seemed to always be the upper one. Well not this time. This time he will have to justify his morality. The games between him and the feds should make for interesting spectator sport.

It had been a long lunch and was close to five when she threaded up the stairs of the dingy Fremantle detectives building. McPherson must have been watching the CCTV from his desktop. He stepped out and halted her.

'I need you in my office, lass.'

A bit grumpy, Boulter thought, shifting the weight of the box to her other arm. 'Sure boss, just let me log this in and I'll be right with you.'

'With that form.'

'Form?'

'The one from the Audit Office.'

'Sorry Boss, I don't know what you're talking about.'

McPherson's face coloured and his lips drew thin. 'This morning, before the briefing, I gave you a form from the Audit Office with explicit instructions that I have it before close of business today. I can't keep saving your pretty little arse Boulter. Get it, fill it in, and get in my office in the next five minutes.'

Her apology was lost as she hurried away, returning a few minutes later to McPherson's office, only then unfolding the paper and looking closely at it.

She sat at the side table in his office, pen poised in hand. He sat on the edge of his desk, arms folded, scowling down at her.

'You have to give a written explanation for why you still have an active legend that was retired from duty over a year ago. Covert Ops Management have reassigned this legend only to discover that you are still holding photographic identity documents, bank accounts and god knows what else. The Audit Office want me to tell them why.'

Boulter zoned out as McPherson ranted about the Public Officer's Act, a misuse of Government property, and potential grounds for dismissal and the enormous costs involved. She scribbled a few lines, scrawled her signature and handed him the paper. He glanced at it and set it aside on his desk.

'So, quid pro quo, sir? You cover my arse on this, I'll cover yours on our wheelie bin case.'

'How exactly does my arse need to be covered?'

'You were the one who applied for a warrant to arrest without probable cause or any evidence to hand. You took the word of Max Glendinning. Sir.'

'That's Superintendent Glendinning, Boulter. A highly decorated officer, now serving with the AFP. Show some respect.'

'Okay, you took the word of *Superintendent* Glendinning. Right? All I can tell you is I've just come from a meeting where there was more bullshit flying around than you'd find at a Kimberley cattle muster. What's more, I don't care how much evidence they bring along against that poor kid, I'm beginning to seriously think he didn't do it. But, for the sake of expediency, I'll go along with it. Apparently I have clothes with the victim's blood, the murder weapon and an incriminating photograph. They're getting back to me with identity docs.

Imagine that? We can't find one skerrick of information about this guy, or the victim, and then along come a couple of cowboys from god only knows what federal agency and *voila!* everything we need. I'll log the evidence and send it up to forensics, and then prepare the charges. Should have a wrap by Friday. Back scratching, sir.'

She turned to leave the room, but before she could pull the door open, McPherson stopped her.

'One more thing. Someone's waiting for you in interview room two. I don't like this one bit, but I have my orders. You are to share everything you know on the case. Everything, clear?'

'Sure boss.'

Boulter left the room and decided to pop her head round the door of the interview room to let her guest know she would be a few minutes. She opened the door, looked in, and stood momentarily frozen as she took in the face studying her.

'Oh, it's you,' she said, and turned and closed the door behind her.

20

There's a little writing exercise I like to do whenever I'm stuck waiting for someone. For years, I've carried a notebook with blank pages, each of which fits about a hundred and twenty words of my quick scrawl. I favour blank pages because they give a sense of freedom, and capturing momentary observations requires freedom. When I'm stuck, I'm not free; but there is no reason my words should not be. I like my Lamy fountain pen for this, its ink flows like blue mercury. I begin by noting down a single observation in just seven words: a complete thought, a full sentence captured quickly, with a definite end point.

I'm sat at a table, alone, erect.

The middle word begins the next observation: again, just seven words.

A chair beneath my arse, cold, hard.

And then another line, again, starting with the middle word.

My arse itches from crusty cold sweat.

From cheek to cheek I rock, relieved.

Cheek of these people, left me here.

As my output speeds up, the observations become more random, but always triggered by what I sense from the place, tapping into feelings, sounds, images, tastes and smells as well as visceral responses. A conversation with myself in rapid seven-word bursts.

People without soul, without a bare backbone.

Without: where they see through the glass.

See me waiting, impatience in my eyes.

Impatience, when they are interviewing in here.

Are they good cop, bad cop routine?

Cop this, and one lash for truth.

One way glass, they see me through.

They see what I see, only me.

I smell aftershave through these wall cracks.

Through a nightmare of pounding, interview me.

Of course, I'm a guest, not interviewed.

A crack, the door opens, her face.

Door slams, her face drained, she leaves,

Face it, this is not the time.

Is not the time, the time again?

Time fell apart when she saw me.

When I heard Oh, it's you! Click!

I work quickly, not taking the pen from the page, and not stopping until the page is full. When it is, I start playing with what is on it, seeking out two- or three-word combinations that strike me as unusual. Unusual in their sounds, their linkages, how they combine, the images they evoke. I read backwards from the end, and on the adjacent page, note down any combinations I deem worthy of attention. Those of special significance find their way into my phrase book, a growing collection I call upon when a cold, crusty itch needs to be scratched, and I don't know where to scratch. Often the answer is found in those pages.

In the time between Boulter closing the door on me and her returning to the room, I discover a whole collection of possibles that could lead to poetic coincidences, metaphors or just plain absurd images. I have quite a collection gathered.

Apart fell time; Smell I me; Routine cop? Is that Boulter? Surely not, she's anything but routine. She's freshened up, no longer a face drained, no aftershave smell — but still, her impatience eyes me through the wall cracks of a pounding nightmare.

I close my notebook, pocket my pen, and smile at her by way of greeting. 'Boulter …'

'Lazaar …'

'Busy day?'

'Interesting,' she says. She brings a laptop computer with her and busies herself plugging it into the screen mounted on the wall. She looks back at me as she takes the remote from a holder on the side of the screen and clicks it.

'Yours?' she asks, returning to the seat opposite me.

'I've had better.'

'I'm sure.' There is something cagey about her tone that I can't quite grasp. I wonder how long this serve and volley act will go on. She studies my face, no emotion in her expression.

'I've been instructed to share what facts I know about our wheelie bin murder,' she says, bringing up what appears to be a comprehensive time line onto the screen. 'Although I have no idea on what authority McPherson has instructed this. I think it's a big risk to an ongoing investigation and, frankly, I think you should be behind bars.'

'Yes, you said that a week ago when you brought your thug down to my office. I don't know what it is you think I've got.'

'Yeah you do, Cal Bishop. Now, I want to go home and get some rest, so this is what I know.'

Over the following few minutes, I sit thoroughly engaged in the narrative. A picture of how events of that night might have unfolded begin to form, but it is clearly incomplete.

'Who have you arrested for this?'

'That I can't tell you. All I can say is we've got a good case for this crime.

But, I want to know what you and your mate Bishop have got to do with it.' Her stare is cold and accusatory. I feel a dire need to steer her away from this line of inquiry. Bare faced lying seems to be the only way forward, followed by a gentle manipulative demurral. Nudging, they call it.

'Come on Boulter, let it go. I told you, the last time I saw Cal Bishop was ten years ago. And you know that my only interest in this is finding the killers, because there is a young woman out there whose life is in danger, who you should be protecting. That you're not worries me. Tell me who you've got locked up.'

Boulter is an expert interrogator, she knows how to catch the winds of diversion and tack straight back to the point at hand. I feel that she hasn't shared everything she knows. She is hiding something, and I am certain that that something will turn out to be important.

'You realise this is a multi-agency inquiry, Lazaar? We've got a murder victim with no identity and a perp who is an illegal, so the feds are involved, as are Immigration and Border Control. Your best course would be to give the girl up to Immigration.'

'She's an asylum seeker, Kelly. Last time I looked that wasn't illegal, but threatening someone harm — that's definitely against the law. So, your suspect is a refugee?'

'He's an illegal.' Clearly she isn't budging on that one.

'You've got evidence?'

'Boxes of it.'

I laugh. 'Boxes?… Somehow I don't think so. If he's come here seeking asylum, I doubt he's got boxes of anything. How did you get on to him?'

Boulter falters. I've struck a nerve. For all her bluster, deep down, I can

see that she thinks the source is suspect. When she eventually speaks, her tone is lower, more reserved.

'First of all, I've got nothing to suggest this perp is an asylum seeker. So, as far as I'm concerned, he's an illegal who has committed murder. We got information and concrete evidence that puts this guy squarely in the frame. I collected that evidence, which has now gone to the labs for forensic examination. I'll know more in a couple of days. I don't have full confirmation of his identity as yet — I'm told I will have that tomorrow. So, until then, I can't tell you anything more about him.'

'I thought McPherson's instructions were pretty clear,' I say, trying to suppress my natural tendency to be patronising.

Her response is quick. Obviously she's thought about it. 'It was. Everything I *know*. I don't actually *know* who I have in custody; you'll have to wait. Is there anything else?'

Plenty, I think. But this isn't the place. I am not sure whether we are under observation from behind the glass, or whether this conversation is being recorded by hidden cameras and microphones. I want to remove the conversation from here, so I need a way to get her to agree. I play my reserve card.

'I'm curious about your boy, Kelly.'

'My boy?'

'Yeah, Lucas, isn't it?'

Her face reddens. Something I'm not supposed to know about. 'What about him?'

'That's who you're meeting tonight, right?' The confusion on her face is clear; I begin gesturing with my hand, in a 'come on' manner, and continue talking, nodding. 'I'm sure you mentioned it … that little Thai place … near

Canning Bridge, yeah? … what time?'

'Eight.' One thing that makes Kelly Boulter an exceptional covert officer is her ability to read others and think quickly on her feet.

'Well,' I say, gathering up my notebook, 'I'd better let you get there.'

As I drive, my mind wanders through the patchwork of memories that were the day, synaptic sparks strike in all directions but most fail to connect, severed by an escalating frustration in my quest to discover who the police have in custody for the murder of Ishmail Salim.

My search started early that morning with a visit to Michael Porter at the Fremantle Herald. He is usually well informed about all matters Fremantle, including the activities detectives are investigating — perhaps, especially. I suspect he gets most of that sort of information through a cosy relationship with Karl Baxter, a senior detective far too long in the same nick at the same pay grade. A low life, in my opinion: shop anyone for the backhand of a grub. But, if he is Porter's source, in this case, he must have had nothing to trade.

Although Porter has no idea who was being held, he does have ideas about the upcoming election, and before I manage to excuse myself with all manner of indicators that I have to get to work, he fills me in on his worries that NLP policies on border protection might strike sympathetic chords among voters. He is pessimistic about the outcome Saturday week. I wonder what those chords might sound like: minor, augmented, sharpened fifth. I suggest the only answer is to keep 'em out, a statement only a moment after emitting it I have to qualify. 'Keeping the NLP out, not asylum seekers.'

It is a busy morning of lectures and tutorials, into which I fit a quick update about the lie of the academic turf with Donna Gardner. I learn little,

other than, as far as she knows, plans are surging ahead for the reordering of schools and the hiving off of creative writing to the cultural capitalists. Ricard Koffi fails to show for a scheduled meeting, without notice or apology. This is odd and I spend a few minutes worrying that he is okay; but I soon put it out of mind and take advantage of the time it frees up to cast a few phone calls at shady contacts hoping for an inkling of further information about the Fremantle detectives' suspected killer. By lunch time, I am of the opinion that this is either a very high profile suspect, or the whole deal is some sort of elaborate stitch up. The problem for me is Falullah's safety: she is due to move into the student village this week. If they have the right person in custody, then she has little to worry about. On the other hand, if it isn't the real culprit, then her situation is more dangerous than ever.

By two o'clock, I feel I have no choice but to make the call I'd been hoping I wouldn't have to — a poetic licence isn't something I activate lightly — there are always consequences, and they are devilishly difficult to predict. But so puzzled am I by the secrecy surrounding this arrest, and so afraid for Falullah's safety, that I am convinced a hand needs forcing. Of a general rule, it is far more usual that the police broadcast their successes — public image and all that — than sit on their hands. But in this case they are keeping it tighter than a clam bake off and for the life of me I cannot work out why. Later, I put this to McPherson and he says it is the sensitive nature of the investigation that prevents him from making details public.

'All I can say,' he says, 'is that we have a suspect in custody, and enquiries are ongoing.'

It is a meeting McPherson does not enjoy. His instructions arrive via secure communications and he understands they are inviolable. They come from

the highest office. They are secret. They cause intense discomfort.

'I've instructions,' he says, the Scots roll of his 'r' like a boulder thundering down a mountain, 'that you are to be given information. Boulter is leading the investigation. She'll be back presently; she'll fi' yeh in on what she knows. From me, personally, y' get bugger all.'

I swear, a line of hairy caterpillars has formed a bridge above his red-rimmed eyes, ready to flay me with daggers honed to an edge only non-particles can achieve. He shows me into an interview room, pointing to the coffee machine on the way, indicating that should I want refreshment I am to help myself. It is clear that he will brook no further talk on the matter. I admit I feel terribly exposed sitting in that room, and reach for the sanctity of my notebook.

I pull into a full parking lot at Thai Corner and wait for Boulter to arrive.

There is enough frost between us as we enter the restaurant to spark a refrigeration engineer's wet dream. The owner seats us at the back, in the lower section, next to a rowdy table of blokes who appear to be enjoying a last supper before embarking on another two-week stint on a rig seven hundred kilometres west of Barrow Island. Conversation of the kind I have in mind is impossible. Perhaps, in the circumstances, it is for the best. The food is good, and eventually the oil riggers are washed away on boisterous parting slaps and jibes about how wives and girlfriends will be looked after in their absence. A reasonable silence descends as I sit comfortably replete, contemplating dessert.

She looks hard at me. 'What do you know about my son?'

'This has nothing to do with your son,' I say. 'I told you in the beginning that there was much more at stake here than a simple murder.'

'Perhaps. But answer my question.'

'Look, all I know is that most parents would do anything to help a child of theirs in trouble. Your boy was in trouble, you did what you could. More, perhaps. It's really not that much of a worry.'

'He grew up without me.' Her voice is now distant, regretful.

'I'm sure that wasn't your fault.'

Boulter sits forward, the dark chiselled slits of her eyes bore right through me. 'You've got no idea Lazaar. How dare you? You come into my place of work, demand I hand over sensitive information, and then threaten me. And then tell me it's not much of a worry. How fucken' dare you?'

I too sit forward, hoping my outward expression is soft, appealing. I cup my hands before me, the supplicant seeking a final forgiveness. 'I'm not threatening you, Kelly. I had to get us out of your office because I don't know who might have been watching or listening.'

'You're doing it again, Lazaar: compromising an investigation because you have some paranoid righteous bullshit idea that a conspiracy is afoot.' She lifts a hand and points at me. 'I have a murder, a suspect, and enough evidence to put him away. It's a good case. I get a conviction. I reclaim my good standing and I get out of that toxic hole. If there was anything else, I would know. So you need to get out of my way.'

'And what are you prepared to sacrifice? What moral code has bent so far that you would ignore what's going on here?'

'Look, whatever it is, if it is in any way real, it's way above my station and way above my calling to deal with. I have a bust and I have a ticket back to Midland. That's all I want.'

'Do you think it will be that easy?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

I am playing on a hunch that Boulter is not only a good cop, but one who would like to correct the mistakes of the past and let the waters flow unhindered. Time for some bridge building.

'They have you over a barrel, Kelly,' I say, choosing my tone carefully to suit the words that are about to follow. 'Someone is sitting on unprosecuted crimes involving your son, Lucas. I don't know about you, but that worries the fuck out of me.' She makes a start, but I lift my hand to hold back her reaction. 'I don't know who it is, it could be McPherson, or someone else, someone more senior, perhaps … but while they're holding those cards, you're going wherever they — whoever *they* are — want you to go. I wouldn't be surprised if Glendinning has something to do with it. So, whoever is beholden to him may be the one holding the cards.'

'Jesus.' Tears well behind her eyes. 'So that's how it was done.'

'I'm sorry …'

'Oh it's nothing,' she says waving me away from the subject. 'It's just I got a *please explain* from Audit Branch today. This explains it.'

Actually it doesn't, I think. But I decide that particular truth is best kept where it is. 'We can get you out of this, Kelly. With careful, little, steps. If your nick were a ship, I wouldn't put to sea in it at the moment. We need to weed out the holes — find our allies, don't you agree?'

She sits, staring into the distance, her eyes moist, a wistful little smile forming. It isn't at global warming levels yet, but the ice is definitely melting.

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21

Wednesday 28 August — 10 days before the election

The next day, I have an early tutorial with my third-year group, and we are wrestling with the writing challenges of point of view. Ricard Koffi has shown up, his beard grown, his cap — a permanent fixture apparently — pulled low over his now dark and sunken eyes. As I watch him take a seat in a far corner of the room, I make a mental note to speak with him after the session, check that he is okay.

'Point of view,' I begin, 'is an elaborate dance going on in a reader's mind that balances the dynamics of the relationships between the author — who will at some time make his or her presence felt, opinions noticed, ideologies explicit; the character who sees the events and acts as the intermediaries of those opinions and ideologies, and the reader who is influenced by a bias they bring with them to the work: whether from the reading they have done, the cultural values that shape their beliefs, or the knowledge they have or do not have regarding the reputation of the author. This dance generates tension, because it is a conflict, a three-way tussle which in the end leaves the reader with the detritus to sort out. The author has already sorted it out and left it on the pages, and thence disappeared behind the work, declared dead according to some; the characters are no longer alive, they have ceased to exist along with the ending, although their memories may well live on.

'As a writer, it is the decision you make in respect of how you present, develop, manage this critical aspect of your work that shapes the entire piece. According to Henry James, writers are disposed to have less interest in their own experience than in that of their characters, which means that the point of view you adopt in your writing is always informed by your own perspective on the circumstances of your story, but your responsibility is to your characters — those James refers to as "conceivable fellow mortals".'

'I don't see how a character's experience is not the writer's,' a student interjects.

'Why do you say that?'

'How can your responsibility be to your characters? You said yourself they're not real, they're — what did you call them?— *homo fictus*.'

'They're not real *people*, but they are very real in the sense that you've given them purpose, you've given them motivations to act toward that purpose, you've given them a capacity for acting and an ability to make decisions — that's about as real as it gets.' I pause to study the faces for signs of understanding. And then say: 'Look, your own point of view, an opinion on the observation you made right at the start, right?… that serves as a global perspective. An objective throughline of the story. You want that perspective explored so that a reader might share it or contest it, that is your purpose. In the end, you want them to say "yes! I can see this …".

'You conceive a protagonist and to that character you endow a point of view that has some relationship to your initiating one — it might be a mirror version, it might be somewhat left or right — and this gives the reader a main character throughline for the story. But in order for the values and beliefs of that perspective to be fully fleshed out, you need alternative viewpoints, which are those carried by other characters involved. Every time your main character comes up against another character, the impact causes them to test the values and beliefs held in their point of view, which, depending on how you choose to tell the story, might rub against your global point of view. Call this the impact character throughline of the story — readers will experience the points of view of several impact characters testing your main character's point of view throughout the course of the story. Each of these testing moments is a subjective

throughline for the story. A reader needs all four throughlines to make sense of the story as a whole.

'So, if you want to give your point of view on the matter a fair and reasonable hearing, your first responsibility is to your characters. Does that make sense?' There is sufficient head nodding to warrant me moving on.

We then explore how most of the theories around point of view are primarily centred on readers' responses to authors, which, in my opinion, I say, ignores a commitment to the characters' needs. But, as many theorists are not particularly invested in identifying with a writer's characters, this is understandable. My question to them is how they might see point of view issues as a character does, not as how either the reader or writer does. They should consider, I say, whether a character being written in the first person might see themselves at an advantage or disadvantage because they both see and speak to the story, compared to the character written in the third person who only sees, and has a narrator speak for them. I want them to consider, not so much the reader in the equation, but the character. Is this fair? I ask them. Some discussion then takes place. It is lively and, from my objective perspective, an excellent demonstration of the dynamic relationships of the main character, impact character and subjective perspectives. I note, with no little consternation, that Ricard Koffi is not his usual enthusiastic self, instead remaining somewhat apart.

I encourage the class to share some thoughts.

'We think the advantage the third-person character has is that they are free to appear presently or historically without the reader subjecting them to any knowledge other than what they are experiencing at the time,' the elected spokesperson for the first group reports.

'Yeah, it's as if any history of the events is removed from them,' the

student next to her says.

'It's because they are treated omnisciently, voiced by the author in the guise of a narrator.' Back with the elected spokesperson.

I am warming to this. 'I think that's a fair judgement.' I point to another group. 'What are the comparisons?'

'Well … a first person character as narrator may reveal events as historical,' the spokesperson says. 'We think that allows them to make use of a temporal gap that offers a sense of reflection, memory reconstruction, even memory loss, because the events happened some time before the telling of them. They experienced the events, or know of them first hand, therefore they are part of the history and are then mediating it through their experience.'

Ricard Koffi makes a small contribution. But at least it is a contribution. 'Yeah … but they can also make use of present tense, right? Revealing events as they are happening … as the reader is turning the page. Like they don't know what's happening round them, what's coming up. It amplifies tension, right?'

He's right of course, and it gives me a segue to the central point of the discussion. 'Many theorists like to argue that third person, omniscient, narration is more authentic, and the first-person narrator tends toward unreliability on account of being less knowledgeable. But this thinking discounts the self-evident fact that in order for a story to be told in the first-person, the narrator telling the story must know all the facts of the story, otherwise they can't be telling it. The reader doesn't see this because the issue of reliability is directly related to what a narrating character can or cannot know at any given point in the narrative, and any perceived unreliability has to be relative to both the reader and any common understanding of the cultural experience involved. The omniscient narrator is rarely as omniscient as it seems, so the issue becomes about what the

narrator, as voice for the author, chooses or is permitted to reveal at what points to deliberately manipulate reader interest—'

There is a sudden knock at the door. I take advantage.

'Let's say this moment is an unfolding scene in a story, and I am the first-person narrator' — moving sideways toward the door — 'and in this role, I can only tell the reader that there is a knock on the door. I can't tell who or what does the knocking, only that the sound I hear is what I imagine to be a person knocking. I can make it appear that my telling of the event and the occurrence of the event are simultaneous actions — in other words, I tell it as it happens. I do that by keeping my reportage in the present tense. If I want to introduce more distance between the event and the moment of telling, I use the past tense. My contact with the unfolding events and with the reader suggest that my point of view is highly subjective — it's only what I know and no more. As events unfold, I am engaged with another character in an argument over whether I should change something going on at that moment or not. It is the only point of view available to the reader, they have to take my word for it, assuming that I know what is happening. My stance — my attitude if you like — is that I can speak to the actions of any other character within the frame after opening the door, and consider any alternative course of action they offer, but I can't do that beforehand because I don't have an objective view of these events. The reader will form that objective view after the event and that, I would argue, suggests that my version, in all likelihood, is less manipulative and therefore more reliable than were the events revealed by a narrator in the third person, who reveals the objective view beforehand …'

I pull open the door.

The School manager stands at the threshold with a look of apology

etched across her brow. 'Two police officers are waiting with a warrant to search your office,' she says. Sarah Jollie and I are not close colleagues.

'What are they expecting to find?' I ask her.

'I didn't ask.'

'They'll have to wait, or come back.' My tone is, perhaps, a little too tart. 'I have a tutorial class here.'

'Of course.' Sarah turns to go. A step later, she turns back. 'The Dean expects to see you immediately you're free.'

Of course she does. Police officers turning up to talk to a member of staff. Definitely not a good look for the school.

I instruct the class to write the event of the knock at the door using different perspectives, ranging from a subjective to an objective stance. They need to write several versions, telling it in an historical present, compare a simultaneous present, test different levels of limitation and omniscience. The objective correlative to the event can be whatever they choose, but the actuality of the event itself, and its consequences, must be as it happened. 'Your challenge is to see whether you can achieve the same effect using a third person narrator as you do using a first person narrator,' I say, 'and in your commentary, discuss whether the character written in the first person is in any way at a disadvantage or not compared to the character written in the third person, and why you have drawn those conclusions.'

I leave them to get on with it while I spend the rest of the tutorial thinking about the discussion I will be having later with Donna Gardner. My earlier concern about Ricard Koffi does not re-enter my head.

Two men are waiting in a small meeting room off the manager's office. They

have been served tea and biscuits and are quietly talking when I enter. The older one, at least by way of immediate appearance, stands. He is bordering on portly, thinning a little on top, but still clearly quite light on his feet. The second man, taller, broader, blonde haired and blue eyed, with the kind of smile that issues warnings of charisma, remains in his seat and smiles at me. I place them both in their late thirties.

'I'm Art Lazaar,' I say, 'You fellas are looking for me, I'm told.'

The man standing takes a step forward and extends his hand. 'I'm Jones.' We shake, brief and uncontested. 'This is my partner, Smith.' The man sitting gives a short wave by way of greeting and smiles.

'Right,' I chorus, 'Smith and Jones.'

'That's our names.' Jones is making it clear that I am not the first to make the observation. I wait.

'We're not really looking for *you*, Doctor Lazaar,' Smith says. He crunches through a dark chocolate Tim Tam, a spray of crumbs showers the table surface. 'We're actually looking for someone else, and we have reason to believe you know where we might find that person.'

'Reason to believe,' I say, taking the seat at the head of the table. Jones, momentarily nonplussed it seems, looks at me, then his colleague and then resumes his seat. 'A bit of a worry, eh? Let's hear those reasons.'

Jones wades in. 'Of course, we can't be too specific, Doctor, we are in the middle of a sensitive investigation. I think it best if we take a look round your office, your laptop and your phone. If we have questions after that, then we might all head off into West Perth for an extended chat. How's that sound?'

My insides are churning. I assume that West Perth is a reference to AFP headquarters. That is to say, it is not East Perth, where the WA police is

headquartered. I pour myself a glass of water and take a sip, trying to weigh the options before I speak. I give them a jowly thoughtful nod. 'Well, I am pretty much free. I do have to catch up with my Dean, that's the only pressing matter — I take it you have a warrant that specifies what you're looking for.'

A certain look passes between them. Smith removes a sheet of paper from his zipper satchel, and unfolds it in front of him. He makes no effort to share it with me. Cat and mouse games play both ways, I think.

'I don't suppose you could each show me some identification that confirms your bona fides,' I say, extracting a pen and notebook, leaning forward, expectantly, on my elbows, holding my pen in both hands as though it has the power to strike down anything before it.

Smith smiles, full teeth, and points at my pen. 'Gonna make notes, Doctor?'

'Oh you never know, Mister Smith, a poet is always ready with a pen.'

'Agent Smith,' he corrects me.

I look at him hard. 'Really? Talent agent, booking agent, travel agent?…'

'He's an agent of the AFP,' Jones intercepts. 'You call him Agent Smith, and you call me Agent Jones.'

'In that case,' I say, pushing my chair back, 'you'd better give me evidence that confirms that information, and you'd better present me with a written warrant specifying precisely what it is you are looking for in your intended search of my office and effects. You have ten seconds.'

Jones raises his hand to show me his warrant card. I reach toward him, indicating that he should pass it to me for inspection.

He smiles and shakes his head. 'Uh-uh. Can't leave my hands I'm afraid. Regulations, you know?' Smith nods, also smiling.

'In that case,' I say, standing, moving to the door and cracking it open, 'you'd best be on your way.' I poke my head through the door and call, 'Sarah, can you get security up here please? And someone from legal?'

Smith and Jones are no longer smiling. Jones comes forward and stands a couple of arms lengths distant. Smith lifts himself easily out of his chair, pushes it in and stands behind it.

'This is an official warrant card of the AFP,' Jones snarls into my face, holding a wallet up above his shoulder. I can only see it at a distance; the insignia of the Australian Federal Police is visible, but it is too far away to identify a name, photograph or number. 'It's the only authority I need to arrest you, or make a search of your property if I suspect you are involved in certain crimes involving people trafficking.'

'Be that as it may, Agent Jones,' my words making an effort to be resolute and proud, 'I can't see the details of your card from this distance, much less record them so I can check later that you are in fact who you say you are. As it stands, it would appear you are here on false pretences. I can tell you that, without a proper warrant, you will not be getting access to my rooms and personal effects, and if you wish to arrest me, you will have to demonstrate to the university's security officers that you are exactly who you say you are, with the authority you say you have. Your call.'

I stand back from the door. Jones returns his wallet to his pocket, nods across at Smith who makes a show of revealing a concealed firearm beneath his left arm as he pulls his jacket around and buttons it. He walks around the table, stops in front of me and looks at me, cold, smiling.

'Not today, Doctor Lazaar, not today. Lucky for you we have to be somewhere else shortly. But keep an eye out. We will meet again.'

Donna Gardner is standing at the door flanked by two uniformed security officers as Smith and Jones leave the room. I stand with her in the doorway, watching as they fade into the hallway art. She ushers me back in, follows, shuts the door, pours herself a glass of water and sits in the chair I'd recently vacated, indicating that I too should take a seat. I choose one on the window side of the table.

'You realise, Lazaar, that you have just threatened two officers of the Australian Federal Police.' I feel sure there is the hint of glee somewhere in her voice.

'What on earth makes you say that, Donna?'

'They told Sarah they had a warrant to search your office. Why? What are they looking for?'

I meet her eyes, and pause, basking in her rescue. 'It's pretty hard to explain, Donna, but you can rest assured it has nothing to do with my investigations into teaching creative writing.'

'That assurance makes me more afraid. What did they want?'

'I don't know,' I say, unsure of how much I should tell her, 'I doubt very much that they had a warrant. If they did, they refused to show it. I'm not even sure they are AFP agents, as they like to call themselves. As to what they wanted — they said they were not looking for me, but looking for some *one*. They didn't get around to saying who, or how searching my office could possibly help them.'

'A student, perhaps?'

'As I say, Donna, I don't know.'

22

Friday 30 August — 8 days before the election

I find myself sitting alone in the back of a black BMW as it whisks along Leach Highway, a low murmur rising from below and a fading breath of wind filling the vacuum behind its remarkable aerodynamic form. At the wheel is a dour faced woman — hawkish springs to mind in my consideration of her appearance as I watch how she sits, erect in her seat, watchful green eyes taking in the movement of the world as it approaches, passes and recedes at precisely the speed limit of the highway. I get the feeling she misses nothing and will not, when it comes to her place on the road, put a foot wrong. A bluetooth phone device extends from her ear, her hair cut so that it folds neatly behind to accommodate this necessity of the job. While she drives, she directs a conversation into it: short, brittle sounds with the cut of a northern European accent extending momentarily above the orchestral splendour of the vehicle's sound system.

I am in the car because I've been summoned.

Late yesterday, a phone call from his assistant instructs me to join Lipschitz for lunch today; not the sort of call best ignored. The whole idea of it, though, strikes me as somewhat absurd. Lippers doesn't usually lunch with lower forms of the academy such as me, he has much bigger mountains to move and consequently reserves his private time for those whose influence and worth are of similar magnitude. But when I get to the appointed place at the front of the university's main entrance, at the appointed time, he isn't there to meet me.

This woman is.

She introduces herself as Lipschitz's driver — I don't catch her name — and guides me to the rear of the vehicle, opens the door and gets me tucked up inside, where for just a moment, I luxuriate in the soft leather and firm lumbar support the seat provides, and the sweet ambiance of newness and meticulous

care. There are few luxuries quite like it. But my reverie is not to linger.

'We are to go ahead. Lipschitz will join you there,' she says, closing the door on me with just the right amount of pressure to produce a firm thunk, cutting short any opportunity for me to enquire after the location of 'there'.

If anything can be said about our university's vice chancellor — indeed, what a great many do say about him — is that he is a colourful character. Even our first meeting can be put in the colourful basket. It is not long after my appointment, at a Vice Chancellor's Awards night at the Esplanade Hotel in Fremantle, and although I have no doubt the chance meeting is not be an event he recalls, it is firmly cemented in my memory. We are, in fact, shoulder to shoulder at the urinal and exchange the kind of pleasantries men exchange in those intimate moments. Am I enjoying the evening? Have you got a child collecting an award? Happy with the food? To which I respond yes, no, yes, and launch my own inane line of inquiry with you're the VC, right? He grins and nods as he shakes. How does one get to be that? He looks me square in the face and says two words I will never forget.

'Wally Lipschitz.'

He commands extraordinary presence and I study him. His blue suit, mineral in tone, with its delicate shadow stripe lifted by the soft glow of the down-lights curiously draws me to the light grey of his eyes. The fit is perfect. Beneath it, a blue spruce shirt, and a skilfully-knotted tie in dusty lilac with a mustard gold strip dances off the top edge of his belt. His appearance is simultaneously vigorous and chic, with no small hint of the classic man, and I can not help but wonder how such an effect is achieved. He packages and zips, and washes; and studies his hair for a moment in the mirror. Adjusts the smile, gives me a look, nods, and leaves

the room like he is riding a Segway. Few men are made like Lipschitz. He can make you feel as though you are known and recognised, important while in his presence, yet, afterwards, leave you knowing full well that he has no idea who you are. Nor does he care.

My ruminations on Lipschitz last until we are crossing Stirling Bridge. The river below is bloated with winter rains, choppy and driven like black thoughts to the freedom of the ocean. Ralph Wahlstrom may well call my lost moments a matter of *Wu Wei* — doing without doing — for there's no question I am composing during the journey, sifting the remnants of memory into a firm form that can materialise as character: something I know I can deal with when we reach the end of this journey, beginning now to dread what that place might be.

The river throws *fishy* at me as I jerk my gaze from it and struggle to place the objects of my thoughts into a narrative that might make sense. Basho's words, *Let not a hair's breadth separate your mind from what you write*, haunt me, remind me that, in the end, the eternal struggle is not with other men, but with our own capacity to rise above the mundane and narrow the gap between what goes on in your mind and what you get onto the page so that your mind might just possibly meld with another's.

'We write,' I say, suddenly aloud, 'because we resist.'

The driver looks back at me in the rear view mirror, her bright green eyes unsmiling, but she dutifully asks what I'd said.

'Nothing,' I reply. 'A conversation between me and my conscience.'

I am met at the front door of Balsamic & Olives by a tall, slender man with a

dark complexion. Jet black hair, full and slicked across his forehead in a wave of provincial valour frames a well-practised smile. Deep crow's feet that lead to a focus point at the centre of his eyes suggest years of slog at his devoted profession.

'Doctor Lazaar.' His greeting positions me as some soul long absent from his village and now returned with the elixir of fortune. How does he know? I bet he does that with everyone, and I am feeling immediately welcome as I follow him to a low table in the lobby. 'You have a few minutes to wait, sir. Can I get you an aperatif?'

I struggle to place the accent. Baltic, I finally decide, but long gone, with many other languages acquired since. 'Soda water with a splash of Angostura,' I reply, taking a seat by the window. The deep water belt at the centre of the river appears to have darkened since I crossed the bridge, if that is at all possible. Angry little fountains splash against the bridge pylons leaving swirls of white on the surface just long enough to be swept away before another splash creates a new pattern. I turn and follow the maitre'd with my gaze, noting the way he instructs a young waiter and then mounts the steps heading toward what I imagine to be an inner dining area, answering a call on his mobile phone as he goes.

So this is Balsamic & Olives. I cast around at the decor, admiring the representations of the far corners of the world in the fine arts lining the walls. The lighting, subtle and moody, murmur haven of the rich and powerful in suggestive tones. Plush seats in muted urban tints speak volumes to the virginal white of the tablecloths, the reflected pinlights of the silverware drawing my eye to the meticulous detail of the settings. I can see why Lipschitz picked this place.

It oozes power. Lipschitz likes power. In particular, he likes people to see his power. Or feel it. With him it's a palpable thing. That's what it was that night way back then, in the men's room, not presence. Power. He needs to know that I know where the power is. So why does he need that now?

My drink arrives. I scoop it from its coaster, rattle the ice with the stirrer — an olive branch, no less — and stand so I might gaze out the window and watch as a sudden squall squeezes its way out of the south western sky. The light falls as mountains of green and black thunderheads paste Fremantle into an apparition and swallow the cranes over the harbour. Within the space of seconds the chemical grey murk engulfs the limestone cliff across the water and the old harbour master's control tower that sits on top. It rolls across the river, a relentless sky tsunami that vents a blast of rain and hail against the window with such ferocity that I reel back involuntarily, almost falling into the arms of the most powerful man in the state.

'Doctor Lazaar?'

I'm not sure if it is a question of recognition or surprise. I look stupidly at the outstretched hand before recovering something of a sensible demeanour and grasping it to shake.

'Roger Lamord,' he says. His grip firm, his hand warm and dry to the touch. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes,' I reply, pausing to reflect on what had just happened. 'The weather caught me by surprise — I'm sorry.' If anything the wind has intensified and the rain driving from the sky in horizontal tracer streams. A boat tears from its moorings downriver and pitches and bucks its way into the jetty before us. The wind snatches its listing hulk and tosses it across the boardwalk leaving it high,

but not dry, on the footpath. I've never seen anything like it.

Lamord smiles. 'Yes, it can do that here sometimes. Look, Lipschitz has been held up — he won't be joining us after all.'

'Us?' I feel completely on my back foot.

'Yes. Actually, it was me who wanted to have lunch with you.' He pauses and looks back into the dining area. 'Come, let's go up — leave your drink, Milorad will see to it.'

When we are sat, I think I might try to recover some of the initiative. Although, I admit I feel a little flighty and I'm not sure if it is the suddenness of the storm, or the fact that I am alone with a man I know nothing about in reality, but have always considered, in my ignorance, a sociopath in full possession of that all-too-dangerous combination of excessive money and power. He is smooth shaven — unnaturally so — his spectacles of fine gold almost lack lustre next to his skin. I address his smile, wondering whether it is money alone that gets teeth so even and polished like porcelain.

'Mr Lamord, why would you want to have lunch with me?'

The smile widens, but I notice it doesn't reach his eyes. 'Roger, please. Can I call you Art?'

'That's my name,' I say, and a vision of Smith and Jones from the day before pops quite unexpectedly into my head. He continues.

'Lipschitz tells me you have a special talent for finding missing' — a beat — 'things. Hmm … perhaps not things … how did he put it? Yes, that you investigate lost theories.'

'Lippers told you that?' I am fast losing any grip I might have had on initiative.

'He did. In fact, he said you were quite good at it. You have a reputation.'

Drinks arrive before I can answer, along with a consommé, its aroma strong and unusual. I allow it to sit and waft in my direction, but try as I might, I can't place the tang. I think silence and patience might serve me well under the circumstances. I proffer a smile and hold my counsel.

'You see,' Lamord says, taking up his napkin and spoon, advancing on his soup with reserved relish, 'a colleague of mine has had something taken. He'd like it restored.'

'A colleague?' The taste is strong, fiery. It strikes the back of the palate and remains long after the swallow.

He smiles. I'm not sure if it was at my reaction to the food, or to carry the conversation forward.

'In my position, I curry a lot of favours, you understand? People owe me. I owe them. I'm sure you're familiar with the currency.'

I nod and take another draught of the soup. This time the taste is a little less of a shock, in fact it contains something that I feel needs to be made more definite; something quite salivant. I take another spoonful, sure that I will identify the mystery flavour, but it seems the closer I get, the further away its label drifts. It makes me think of the wisps of story that advance from the fog of the mind but never quite materialise. Yet you know they are there.

'And it is a theory?'

'A theory? No, of course not. It's a thing.' He smiles. 'Although, I do have a theory; but it can wait. Are you enjoying the soup?'

'Very much. I can't quite place the flavour.'

As it turns out, Roger Lamord is exceptional dining company. He

charms me with the story of how he came to realise his dream of building a restaurant that serves the finest cuisines from all over the world. Flights arrive every day carrying fresh ingredients from wherever specialities of the day were originally mastered. *Culina mundi*, while perfectly describing the scope of the menu, simply does not meet the poetry of the experience. I am supping on a soup of cassava spiced with *guasca* and finely chopped coca leaf, all of which, he informs me, was freshly harvested not more than two days ago in the jungles of Llanos and Amazonas. Cassava is among the seven deadliest foods in the world — up there with fugu. And I am eating it. Actually enjoying it. Had I been to Colombia, he asks. No, I had not. He likes the Colombians, he says, they *survive*. The Amazonas region is home to the most exotic, and at the same time, most dangerous foods, and potent drinks. A simple mistake in preparing the soup can result in death. A very painful death. Excruciating. By the time my empty bowl is whisked away, my face is flush and my head lighter than a fistful of fairy floss.

A comfortable silence falls between us, our table like a chess board, waiting on a contest of wills and ideals. A plate is placed before me. I study it. The main feature appears to be the carcasses of two small frogs, served on steaming tubers with pink surfaces and yellow centres, and a bed of green leaves bathed in a tangy sauce. I remove a frog leg and place it in my mouth. It has a creamy surface texture with delicate bones that crunch as I bite into it and draw the succulent meat away. The flavours are extraordinary.

Our conversation veers into political waters. Lamord takes me on a journey of his vision of a world of political freedoms, free speech, fewer government interventions, property rights and the glorious benefits of the free market. He points to my plate.

'Like it?' He can not restrain his delight. 'You wouldn't get that without successful enterprise. Capitalism works because it creates new things, fresh innovation. We need to take this country into the twenty-first century. We don't need governments hampering that progress — overtaxing, undermining wealth, over-regulating, devaluing property, attacking freedom of speech — we need government that strengthens our economy, allows us to be competitive in world markets. People want stability, strong leadership. Safe borders.'

Having disposed of one of the little frogs, I wipe my lips and laugh.

'If I may, Roger, while certainly delicious, this meal doesn't appear to be a fresh innovation. A recipe pilfered from some exotic culture that doesn't have the means to resist, I'd bet. What's new is that you've brought it here and elevated its value well beyond the peasantry where it originates. You could call that innovation if you like, but it's hardly new. The English have been doing that for centuries.'

Lamord leans forward. 'The soup you had earlier' — I nod — 'a speciality by the Colombian natives. It was boiled up with fresh coca leaves, which is where the little burn at the back of the palate comes from. These juvenile bullfrogs secrete a poison so potent, the natives use it to tip their hunting arrows. If the chef is not careful in skinning them, you could die. Hell, he could die. And that tuber, not cassava, but another which contains a potent neurotoxin. You're eating that today because you're my guest. And because my substantial business interests enable it. Because I have planes ferrying ingredients to us, right here, fresh every day.'

I nod, appreciative. 'Like I said, not new, though. Very old. And here because you raided a culture.' I take a moment to consider my situation. My face

is warm, my heart racing. 'Look, you're not a fool, obviously. But only a fool believes it's private enterprise that creates new things all on its own. Businesses want to stay with the old. The tried and true. That's why it's called conservative. Your resistance to carbon pricing, a rent resource tax, is only because those actions threaten the fabric of shareholder wealth built on government handouts and virtual commodities. Your enterprises only like to take something that's already proved, which is why you're so enthusiastic about privatising power grids and student loans — they're well proved and positioned for monopoly. If it weren't for governments raising taxes to bankroll ideas over the years, we'd still be in the dark ages. Pinching stuff from a culture is not innovative, Roger, it's appropriation.'

Lamord shakes his head, as though dismissing my response as lunacy. 'People like you don't get it. Everyone wants an egalitarian society, and unless we protect property ownership, you can't have it. If people don't own anything, there would be no charity because they've got nothing to give away. Government shouldn't own property, it shouldn't run organisations that can function more efficiently as business.'

I laugh. 'More efficiently? Let's look at what happens when public organisations get privatised. They get gutted, the money that was being put to public good, employing people, delivering real services, suddenly ends up in the hands of shareholders, individuals, where it does no more than … well, increase your wealth. People like you Roger. In fact a number of your businesses have reaped great benefit from exactly that. You feed prisoners — privatised; asylum seekers — privatised; clean government offices — privatised … tell me, are you paying everyone employed in those businesses proper and correct wages? And

don't make me laugh about charity. Your idea of charity is to buy favour with the likes of Lipschitz so you can profit from his grand scheme of university investment and diversification, get your name on a building, all originally put there by the taxpayer. Without the largess of government funding, Roger, you'd be as poor as those you disdain.'

I pause, waiting, watching his eyes closely, and then return to my plate to mop up the remains of the sauce. I lift my head, sip my soda water and allow my eyes to meet his in a square, questioning look. His face hardens, but not obviously. I relax my tone a little and shift the focus of the conversation.

'Look, I get it. You believe society is made from individuals who use whatever they can to acquire, and acquisition leads to wealth, a portion of which trickles down to the lower echelons, which you believe lifts the overall wealth of society. What you don't see, or choose not to, is that the wealth doesn't trickle down, a useful little device called inflation makes sure of that, and those holes in the ground, those farmlands, those logged forests — they are put there by the taxes our forefathers paid, our royalties that have been traded out for false promises of downstream processing. Still a pipe dream by the way. A mining industry that pays little or no tax, employs very few people, but talks big and loud while it expatriates our money to its offshore havens, and guess what?… still pays bugger all tax. The banks that you want to safely launder your money were all built by our taxes, not by enterprise; the roads you drive your trucks on to deliver your food to the mining companies, where you top up your tanks tax free, all built by the community.'

Lamord stares at me. I feel suddenly small. 'People want jobs, Lazaar. People want our young people to have jobs, not wasting their time at universities

getting educations that don't lead to anything. They want jobs in mining, construction, food and agribusiness, jobs that can earn them good incomes, jobs that build a country. What is it you teach? … Creative Writing? What's the point of that? Novels and poetry hardly makes a country great. The Coalition will deliver jobs that matter.'

I look around the room, making a point of stopping my gaze once in a while, resting on an exquisite piece of art. 'You have a fine collection of art here, Roger.'

Obviously, he thought I was complimenting him on his taste. 'Yes, I have a substantial collection from all over the world. Worth around two and half billion now.' His smugness rubbed like chili in my eyes.

'Curate it yourself?'

'No, I have a curator on staff. She travels and finds pieces. We lend pieces to museums and galleries. She does a good job.'

I sip my drink, nod my approval. 'No doubt educated in a university. A fine arts degree, I shouldn't wonder? And who tots up the values for you, adds it up to your two and half billion? Would that be an accountant? Perhaps you have lawyers drawing up contracts of purchase, or leases? You know what, I bet you go to the theatre — no wait, you're actually on the board of the Perth Theatre Trust … I know, I was considering applying for a position myself until I saw who I'd be rubbing shoulders with, a bit of a worry there, I thought. You talk about having an economy for this country built from the sweat of ordinary folk while you surround yourself with those very educations you disdain. Next you're going to tell me you're a self-made man.'

Lamord sets his knife and fork down, and removes his napkin. Our plates

are whisked away and coffee arrives. 'There's a few people feeling that way Doctor Lazaar, but it won't be enough. Look, fascinating as this has been, I'd like to know how you go about finding these lost theories your reputation boasts of.'

'I'm sure you know how, Roger. You seem to have found a few things yourself, and you've certainly got enough lost theories there — enough I imagine to understand the methods.'

He laughs. 'Oh really? What have I found?'

'Several billion dollars, for one thing. All this art — no wait, your curator found those. Still, I imagine you've found ways to get around paying workers proper wages, ways to avoid paying your taxes. Maybe even ways to avoid their protection, keep them safe' — a beat — 'keep them alive. Truth is, no matter how close to Wally Lipschitz you might be, I can't help you.'

'But you don't know what my colleague wants found.'

'Your colleague?' I try my hardest to mimic an incredulous look. 'Even if I could help, what you're looking for, what you need to find, deep down, can't be found. Not here anyway. Unless what you're looking for is not what I think it is.'

Lamord pauses, sits back in his seat and furrows his brow. 'Do you know a journalist by the name of Calvin Bishop?'

My coffee halts midway between the table and my mouth. 'Knew him, yes. I worked for him in Kalgoorlie many years ago. But he's dead now. Been dead for ten years.'

Lamord leans forward and spreads both hands out on the table, doing his best to look down on my eyes. 'Art, Art, Art ….' He fans his hands across the table in front of him: a smoothing action. 'You and I both know he's far from

dead. Three weeks ago he caused an explosion in Fremantle that killed a man — a man who worked for me. Bishop hid something from a colleague. You need to effect her return and tell me where to find Bishop.'

I do my best to impersonate confused. 'It's a bit of a worry if you think I know anything about that, Roger. Cal Bishop died ten years ago. Perhaps your man, Dosek wasn't it?' — his eyes flicker — 'was chasing a ghost.'

'It was no ghost.'

'Well, perhaps. Can I tell you what I think?' A nod. 'A young homeless man died in that explosion, Roger. Your man had done a deal with this homeless kid, a deal one or both intended to renege on. This particular thug, Dosek, was sent after the kid and it was, in fact, he who caused the explosion. At least, as far as I understand, that's the official version.'

The colour drains from Lamord's face. 'The official version? Bullshit! That's bullshit, Lazaar. Calvin Bishop was there, I know he was there.'

I smile. 'Really? You know? I'm telling you Cal Bishop is dead. He died ten years ago. And whatever you think happened in that tunnel, the official version will be that your man caused the explosion because of a drug deal that went wrong between him and the homeless kid.' I pause and soften my tone. 'Of course Dosek did have a history of depression and amphetamine use. And to be clear, I think what you're doing with the foundation is admirable. I agree that too many Vets return without proper support, especially mental health care. But all that aside, while your noble gesture might be the only thing that can connect you with Dosek, we know, you and I, we know that there is much more, don't we?' I sit forward and we lock eyes across the narrow space of the table. 'There are other things I know, Roger. Would you like to know what they are?'

'I'm listening.'

'Your so-called colleague … that would be Yusuf Ababbas, right?' The light of recognition flares in his eyes, if only briefly. 'Yes, I know about Yusuf — real name, Tuah Johari, brother-in-law of the Malaysian Prime Minister's wife. Enjoys diplomatic recognition in Australia and the title of Tan Sri at home — he's what the Malaysians call a big shot. Rich. Powerful. Connected. A bit like you, Roger. Yusuf runs sham immigration schemes across the region, he's been doing it for years. He's a trafficker with a penchant for enslaving people and selling their labour.

'A fortnight before the explosion, a young man was murdered and dumped in a wheelie bin in Hamilton Hill. Last week, the police arrested another young man as a suspect for that murder. Both young men had connections to Yusuf. Now, I know this young man didn't commit that murder — simply couldn't have done it — yet the Fremantle detectives seem to think it's a slam dunk. They have evidence: the murder weapon, blood, an incriminating photograph. Trouble is, this was a professional job; efficient, cold, calculated…. Word is, the victim was about to blow the lid on Yusuf's operation so he had to be stopped. Which means someone else has to be put in the frame.

'The problem I have, Roger, and this is the real worry, I can't for the life of me understand what the connection is. What would a guy in your position — possibly the most powerful political figure in the state, certainly the richest — be doing mixed up with the likes of Yusuf Ababbas?'

Lamord laughs. 'Sounds like a hell of a book, Lazaar. It's as much fantasy as your bullshit about Bishop being dead these past ten years.'

I laugh along with him, look at my watch as a precursor to a parting

gesture. 'It's my poetic licence, Roger. Goes with the territory. Perhaps I can get your maitre d' to call me a taxi back to the university.'

'Of course.' He signals a waiter, issues an instruction. We sit in silence for a few minutes, and I gaze out the window. The storm has subsided, although it is still very dark and rain falls steadily. A minute or two later, the waiter returns and whispers in Lamord's ear.

'There's a car waiting downstairs,' he says. 'Take the lift to the lower basement level. It'll pick you up by the lift.'

We rise from our seats together, and he extends his hand. I take it and his grip firms up on contact. 'You have twenty four hours, Doctor Lazaar. The package and Bishop.'

The lift dings its arrival and I step out into a gloomy underground car park, turning left toward an approaching car.

'Doctor Lazaar.'

The call comes from behind me and I wheel around. The blow strikes my kidney from behind with such force that I crumple to the ground, gasping for breath, fighting against a rising bile as I border on unconsciousness. Pinlights dazzle before my eyes. Rough hands force me face down, and wrench my arms behind my back, bindings loop around and tighten. A hood thrust over my face stinks of vomit. I lash out with my legs, but another blow in the small of my back sends a knife of pain through my spine, paralysing my legs. I feel myself hauled from the ground, dumped into the back of a vehicle and a gentle pressure applied to my neck. I slide into darkness.

I hold and hold, and my lungs heave as I fight against the involuntary actions of breathing. The surface is near, just above and I strike out with my legs, but it does no good. I am anchored below the surface and the pressure from within increases as I fight back the urge.

A momentary vision of the seven-year-old me pelting down the gravel hill on my twenty-six inch bike flashes into my mind, the snake sliding across my path, too slow to avoid the inevitable. I run over it and it gets caught up in the spokes of my rear wheel. I ditch the bike, narrowly avoid the needle-fine fangs as they snap at my bare legs, amassing gravel rash as I fall headlong into a twelve-year-old me standing rooted to the rocks at the Cape Leeuwin lighthouse, a wild ocean foaming spume behind me as the car veers from above, crashing through the car park barrier, thundering straight at me, and my quick-thinking dad throwing me aside as the front wheel crushes his foot into the rocks. Another lash for the surface. Again restrained. Again, fighting the urge to breathe. The crushing force from within my lungs burns as a swift out-of-control slide becomes a roll and tumble, turning slow motion as the vehicle's steering wheel is wrenched from my eighteen-year-old hands, my head banging with a metallic thud against the side bulkhead and the huge Hammond organ in the back slides toward me, pushing into the twenty-seven year-old me, inebriated, drunk with young love, sliding down a snow covered mountain toward a car park, unable to avoid the four-year-old in a toboggan dragged by his parents up the hill. One more push toward the surface. A desperate attempt. A break through.

A light so bright the glare burns my eyes. I squeeze them tight and dare take a breath. My lungs heave. I pant. Water droplets spray into my airway producing a coughing fit, and another bout of panting and panic. I open my eyes

but immediately squeeze them shut against the light. As I do so, my head is wrenched back, compressing the vertebrae in my neck to crushing point. Some device anchors my head in this position, my legs trapped beneath me, the stretch between the two painful and uncomfortable, my breath rasping loudly in my ears.

And then, a voice.

'Open your eyes, Doctor Lazaar.'

It is a gentle sounding voice, its nasally Italian lilt makes it strangely welcome. I try to comply, but the searing pain of the light is too much. A hollow whack and a shattering pain erupts from my side.

'He said, open your eyes.' This voice is not kind. It has a thick Italian bearing to it. Mechanical. Thuggish.

I open my eyes to slits, trying to comply with the instruction, while reducing the pain of the glare.

'It seems, Doctor Lazaar,' — the kind voice again — 'that you are in possession of certain knowledge.'

I try a grin, although I'm certain no humour is visible. 'I'm in possession of quite a lot of knowledge, actually,' I manage. 'It goes with the title.'

'Yes, of course.' This voice is behind me. It is different. It has a Celtic lilt. 'What he means is quite specific knowledge, Doctor Lazaar. He wants to know where is Calvin Bishop?'

'He's dead. Died ten years ag—'

Another hollow whack sounds just before the pain strikes. The blow lands immediately below my right ribs, but the pain shoots round my gut and lodges in my bowels. It is all I can do to prevent an involuntary evacuation.

'Wrong answer, Doctor Lazaar.' The high-pitched Italian again.

'It's the only answer I can give.' My voice is feeble and my eyes drowning in tears. 'I haven't seen him because he's de—'

This blow is from the other direction and digs a pit in my solar plexus so deep I think my spine has torn. An undertow of bile floods my mouth, but I can't turn my head, or pitch forward to get rid of it; so, again, I hold my breath. And this time I can no longer hold back. The soft spluttering motion spreads through my trousers in putrid liquid form.

'Oh Jay-sus!' the Irish voice cries. 'What the hell is that?'

A blow rains down on my right hand and the sound of bones crunching reaches my ears. Strange though, there is no pain.

'All right, Doctor Lazaar, let's try another question.' The Irish voice, now very close to my left ear. 'The girl … where is the girl?'

'Wha … irl?'

'The one you mention in this conversation.'

I hear a click and then the sound of my voice. *Come on Boulter, let it go. I told you, the last time I saw Cal Bishop was ten years ago. But there is a young woman out there whose life is in danger, who you should be protecting.*

Amid the blur of lingering unconsciousness and the waves of pain wracking my body, I have to ask myself who I am in the room with, and how they had come by this conversation. Truth is, I can't place it, but obviously it is a conversation with Boulter. Has she sold me out?

'I don't know where she is,' I say slowly, trying to form words and avoid drowning in my own vomit. 'The police—'

The next blow lands just below my heart. I have time enough to register its impact, but not enough for any pain. The light fades.

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23

Sunday 1 September — 6 days before the election

The western face of the hills across the river from Roger Lamord's Swan Valley mansion sits deep in morning shadow as the sun's early rays split the trees on the ridge into ghostly silhouettes like back-lit ramparts in a fort against marauders from the east. The morning air on his rear porch feels crisp and moist on his cheeks as remnants of an overnight dew remain floating in ghostly mist above the river and glisten on the new buds bursting on vines that run in parallel rows down the slope. The sky above is blue and cloudless.

Lamord's acreage spreads on both sides of his house down a gentle slope to Swan Street, continues in two lots to the river, and then across the river right through to Great Northern Highway. Forty-four hectares in total, with just under thirty in vines. From his porch, he can see practically all of it. On the other side of the river, in the centre of his view, sits the old Lucchessi homestead surrounded by newly tended vines, an image of perennial decay amidst new growth, kept on the one hand as a reminder of Alfonso's great generosity toward a young Roger on the run from a school that had brutalised him, and on the other a symbol of the finality of the family's financial destruction at his whim. It is the epitome of his power, his tenacity, patience, and utter contempt for those who wrong him.

The weekend papers sit on a small table, The Telegraph on top with its full-page portrait of LOTO and a great tick alongside indicating the preferred choice of the free press in next Saturday's poll. A great picture; a great message. Only five percent of voters had yet to make a choice of where their vote would go. The fact that seventy one percent of that five percent were women mattered not at all. A woman had all but destroyed our functioning democracy, and that would be put right one week from now in a trouncing the left had never before

experienced. The party of waste and open doors would feel the wrath of the people.

He had just hung up from a call with Bob Conroy, the Liberal Party national director, an arrogant, lop-sided apparatchik who claims ownership of everything that passes through the party lines. Including it seems, his own media adviser.

'I've convinced Sam to join me in Canberra after the election, Roger. She's the perfect CoS don't you agree?' The undertone suggested much more than the Chief of Staff role going on between Conroy and Codlin. What could he say to that?

'Perfect in every way, Bob. She's done a fantastic job of keeping border security front and centre. But there's a whole team over here working on these critical issues, and that needs proper recognition.'

'Yes of course, Roger. LOTO has agreed to giving Noah a good cabinet spot. Maybe junior to start with—'

'He's a very experienced member, Bob.'

'Yes, but only in a West Australian context. Leadership needs much more, you understand?'

Oh yes, I understand. But not for long, my friend. Old money eventually becomes tired money. 'Yes, of course Bob. And Superintendent Glendinning?'

'Oh absolutely, Roger. The Border Force will be headed up by a military figure, we all think that's necessary, given the circumstances, but Max will come in at a very senior level. LOTO has already agreed to that. But let's get next weekend over first, shall we? We still have to win.'

'Yes, of course Bob. Things are still on a bit of knife edge, but this week

has some favourable surprises in it, I'm sure.'

'That's excellent Roger. Keep me posted.'

The silence left a distinct taste in Lamord's mouth, and were it not for the ringing of the gate alarm, he would have beelined for the bathroom and a mouthful of Listerine.

The driveway to the house led from West Swan Road and rose past a lake he'd created by damming a section of Henley Brook. It was lined with maple trees, their fallen leaves rotting around the roots. Perfectly manicured grass rolled up the slopes into garden beds about to burst in springtime renewal. Yes, renewal, that's exactly what this day is about. He clicked a remote app on his mobile phone and the image of Max Glendinning's face through his car window appeared. He hit the open button. Glendinning would see a green light on the panel, and the double gates began separating, swinging silently and smoothly open, inward, a welcoming gesture.

It wasn't Glendinning's first breakfast visit to the vineyard. He was dressed in jeans and a black linen shirt over which a loose fitting, fig-leaf green, all-weather jacket hung open. He was fit and moved confidently and easily from his car toward his host, an action that had Lamord feel a momentary pang of envy as they shook hands. They went though the house to the rear porch, where the breakfast table was set on a heavy jarrah ensemble, attended by a portly Italian woman of indeterminate age who muttered in her mother tongue as she poured juices and coffee and signalled that the two men should take their seats and be ready for the feast to follow.

'Damn, I love this view,' Glendinning said. 'It's like being in another country.'

Lamord looked at his guest, smiled. He pointed. 'That section is a new planting of Merlot, but just down the bottom there we have a section of Tinta del Pais — there's a patch of soil there closer to the water table and this grape loves a damp root and a full rising sun. It's perfect. It comes off the harvest about two weeks earlier than the other black fruit, full of sugar and an aftertaste that lingers like a woman in your beard.' He smiled and poured a sparkling Rosé for each of them. 'I think I'll call it Le Temperament.'

They laughed and toasted the morning and the anticipation of the following weekend's celebrations. Hot pastries arrived and Glendinning attacked the condiments with the relish of a stockbroker at a merger. Lamord grew serious.

'Sean Dower is a liability.' Glendinning looked up, attentive. Lamord continued, 'He's out of control. Reckless. Making mistakes.'

And just like that, the meeting was suddenly all business.

'How, exactly?'

'There've been a number of things, but this time …' He gestured, a wiping motion, clearing the waste.

'What's behind it?'

'Can't really say. Maybe it's power and he can't handle it. I've seen power make men stupid. He's had a lot of head in Indonesia. And Dosek's death affected him pretty badly. I don't know, Max, could be a number of things. But we have to deal with it, things are too close and we can't afford any more cock ups.'

'The girl?'

Lamord shrugged.

After a moment's thought Glendinning continued. 'Well that's a problem.

I thought you were sorting it out. Did you get anything from Lazaar?'

Lamord shook his head. 'We had quite an enjoyable lunch. I thought, when he realised what he was eating, he was about to cave' — he gave a short laugh — 'his face was like chalk. But it turned out he knew things … I had no idea.'

'Things? Like what?'

'Yusuf for starters — his name, his origins, his connections … But worse. He said the official line on the explosion that killed Dosek was that it was an accidental death and most likely due to some drug deal gone wrong.'

'I heard about that.'

'Well perhaps you can explain to me Max, exactly how that can be.'

'I told you Roger, this guy's dangerous. He moves like there are no walls.'

'Yes … well … thanks to Sean Dower and a couple of Enzo's thugs, his movements might have come to an abrupt end.'

Glendinning, thoughtful, in a distant voice, managed to say, 'Jesus! What's happened?'

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24

It had been nine minutes past five on Saturday morning when Boulter closed the door on her Lockhart Street home. She knew the time because she timed every morning run. The previous night's storm had dispatched a branch from one of those gum trees favoured by turn-of-the-century property developers for their quick growth, and dropped it across her front boundary. It took part of a native hedge with it and blocked half the driveway. Even in the half dark she could see that it would need professional removal. But as she went to walk around, a lump lying in the morning shadows next to it caught her eye. She played the torchlight from her mobile phone on the shape and saw Art Lazaar's battered and unconscious form, his face glistening with a strange, silvery purple from rain-soaked, drying blood in the dappled glow of street lamps.

Boulter had reacted quickly and professionally. Within twenty minutes a team from Kensington Station and an ambulance were both on the scene. The paramedics performed a quick, though thorough examination and left within minutes, taking Lazaar to the emergency ward at St John of God, Murdoch, leaving Boulter to provide as many details as she could to the Kensington police. She knew they would log the details on the central records system as a possible assault and dump. She held back details on anything that would reveal her personal relationship with the victim.

As soon as the local police had left the scene, Boulter called McPherson. He insisted she let the locals handle the matter, have her day off and meet him the following day — Sunday afternoon — to ward off any negative impacts of a Professional Standards investigation. It was standard protocol: all events in which a police officer has some direct involvement are investigated for Ethics and Standards clearance. She had used a skype phone from her laptop and called McPherson on his personal mobile number, keeping the conversation to the

bare essentials. The last thing she said was that when she left the office Friday evening, she'd left a mess in the interview room and it might be an idea to get the cleaners in. By the time she was seated in McPherson's office Sunday afternoon, the entire two floors had been swept by the tech team and a haul of listening devices and miniature cameras found.

McPherson gestured toward the printed stack of images left behind by the techs. 'What made you think …?'

'Last Monday, when Lazaar was here, he was paranoid about being recorded by hidden devices. And — I can't explain this — but whoever dumped him at my place is sending me a message. I just don't know what it is, or who. When was the last tech sweep?'

'It's done quarterly — not that long ago — July.'

'Nothing found?'

'Nothing. In fact, to my knowledge this is the first time ever.'

'How many?'

'Three devices in my office, two in yours, three in each of the interview rooms and four in the situation room.'

Boulter picked up a printout and studied it. 'This is a door handle casing.'

'Yep. Door handles, light switches, desk caddies … this shit is super-tech, lassie. These little cameras and microphones are sensory activated, they use bugger all power, have batteries that last forever' — shuffling through the paper — 'this little beauty is a four-G wi-fi router mounted in an exterior camera housing. All these devices feed this and off it goes into the ether, encrypted, rerouted, impossible to trace.'

'Is it someone on the inside?'

'You tell me. I have to go to cybercrimes; my guess is they'll take it to

the feds, or ASIO.'

'Can we keep it in-house?'

'Jesus Boulter, what are ye' suggestin'?'

'I'm suggesting we sit on it and work our cases. Don't let anyone else know, not even others in here. Can you ask the techs not to report it?'

'Christ, Division'll have my nuts just for asking.'

'All right, how long do you think you can sit on it? Can it wait until I get the forensics back on Lazaar?'

McPherson shifted in his seat and reached into his bottom drawer for a bottle and two glasses. 'What forensics would they be, lassie?' He slurped two generous shots. 'I thought I was pretty clear — you were supposed to have yesterday off. You can't work this. Professional Standards will have a field day with it.'

Boulter took a lengthy sip at the liquor and let its heat flood her mouth. 'You were perfectly clear. But the truth of it is, we don't know what we're dealing with here. I went to the hospital, recovered his clothes, took some swabs from his injuries and beneath his nails, and got them into the lab. I'm afraid I used your name and probably one or two of your favours. I'm hoping to get results tomorrow.'

McPherson drained his glass, topped it up and said, 'Okay, would you like to walk me through the whole thing, lassie.'

Boulter handed over two typed sheets of paper stapled together. 'The chronology is all in here, sir.'

'All the same, Boulter, I want to hear it.'

Over the course of the next hour, Boulter narrated the events of her actions following the discovery of the unconscious Lazaar in her front yard the

previous morning. When McPherson was satisfied that her actions would stand the scrutiny of Professional Standards the meeting came to an end.

As she left the office, the sun had sunk behind the city buildings throwing long shadows across the street to the car park. A voice called to her from a doorway.

'Detective. Detective …'

Boulter turned toward the voice and found Spider standing in darkness. 'Spider, what is it?'

'I need to talk to you.'

'Would you like to come over to my office.'

'No. Not there. Your car?'

Boulter led the boy to her car. He was visibly frightened. Something had spooked him. 'What's up?'

'Those men that night of the explosion, in the car, the black four-wheel drive …' Spider faltered into silence as he drew a scrap of paper from a pocket.

'What about them?' Boulter prompted.

'They're looking for us, you know, us bruvvers … 'cos of what we might of seen that night.'

'What you might have seen?'

'Yeah, like their faces and some girl, but I dunno anythink about that.'

'Did you?'

'What?'

'See their faces?'

'Not really … well yeah, there were, like, two uvver guys in the car — could of bin free — I saw the driver. Had really hard eyes, like steel. I seen 'im again last night wiv a dog lookin' for our cribs, me an' my bruvvers, like. Man,

I'm shit scared, these are fucken' nasty people.' He thrust the piece of paper at Boulter. 'This is 'is number plate, black Range Rover.'

Boulter took the paper and read the letters scrawled in no better than an infant's hand. SECS06.

'Thanks for this Spider, it's really helpful. What sort of dog?'

'It's a fucken German Shepherd, a big fucker.'

'Have you seen them today?'

'Nah. I been hidin' here till I saw you. I got a safe spot though — they'll never find me.'

'Okay. Would you prefer if I took you somewhere safe for tonight?'

Spider grinned. 'What a jail cell or somethink? Lock me up for the night? Nah, I'll be fine.'

'It wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but if you're sure.' Boulter handed Spider a twenty dollar note. 'Look after yourself, Spider. I'm going back into the office to run this plate.'

'Yeah, but that's not all.'

'What do you mean?'

'There's some Italian guys lookin' for Hunter. They ain't with the uvvers, these are gangsters.'

Boulter looked away, past the markets toward the oval. 'Yes, well … we're all looking for Hunter, Spider.'

The vehicle was one of a fleet registered to a security company called SECSUR, leased from Barbagello Motors about nine months earlier. Boulter called the company's head office in Burswood only to get a recorded message about office hours being 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday. There was no after hours

number. She ran a corporate check on the company through ASIC and Police databases, and read through the company website for any useful information. SECSUR was one of the sprawling SANCO group of companies. It held contracts with the federal and several state governments providing security services to prisons and detention centres. It was frequently called upon to provide security for international officials visiting the country, government ministers and other specialist travel requirements by important government and corporate luminaries. The Managing Director was listed as Sean Dower. Boulter left notes on her desktop in preparation for a follow up the next morning. She left a written instruction on Robinson's desk to obtain a complete corporate work up on the group first thing.

She went home via the hospital, and was told that Lazaar was conscious and no longer in intensive care, but it was the doctor she had come to see. He was a young African man, tall and graceful in his movements, with a wide smile that revealed white, even teeth. Concern lines showed on his forehead as he examined the details on the screen in front of him.

'The injuries are consistent with a severe beating,' he said. 'Three cracked ribs, two broken fingers, a severely bruised kneecap, some injury to his spleen and a whole company of cuts and bruises to his face and upper torso …' He was thoughtful for a moment as he re-read back through the notes. 'It seems that he was tied to a chair with his arms pulled back behind him.' He tapped an image on the screen with a perfectly manicured fingernail. 'This, though … this points to something much more serious.'

Boulter looked at the notes. Her years in the navy medical corps paid off. 'Injury to the upper spine and soft tissue at the front of the neck. Is this a whiplash?'

'Not quite. It appears that Mister Lazaar had his head pulled back to a point where these upper vertebrae were severely compressed and the front tissue torn. That's considerable force. The initial examination showed an abrasion across his forehead — something like a carpet burn. I think a strap of some synthetic material was used to keep his head in that position.'

'Jesus!' The doctor gave Boulter a disapproving look, she guessed on religious grounds. 'Waterboarding?' But she was thinking about where she had come across similar abrasions before. The image floated on the edge of consciousness.

His eyes darkened and his voice dropped in pitch. 'I'm afraid so. This method opens the throat completely and restricts movement to allow any clearing of water. It's remarkable he didn't drown.'

'If you don't mind me asking, Doctor, have you seen this before?'

'In my country, in the Sudan, this method of tying the head back is a favourite torture practice of Special Forces units. It is meticulous and planned. They took their time. They had time.'

Boulter left the hospital and headed home. Twenty minutes later she sat on a stool at her kitchen bench, her mood sombre, and Joni Mitchell's *Big Yellow Taxi* on the stereo reminding her of just what people can take away. She drained a glass of red wine and refilled it. She had no easy explanation for what she'd learned at the hospital. Nor for what she deduced from it. What had Lazaar stumbled upon? What had we?

25

Monday 2 September — 5 days before the election

Boulter headed out into crisp morning air, stretching each stride a little more than the previous as she wound up to optimum pace. The river was still, a fog rose around small craft moored along the shoreline, their reflections mirrored like acrylic ghosts in the glassy surface. As Boulter pounded the footpath along Bateman's Bay, a small flock of pelicans emerged from the rushes, flapping their enormous wings as they pushed out from the water's edge into the river. Miniature waves slurped up against the waiting hulls.

Boulter's rhythm set her mind to work like the gears of a clock, ticking over with each footstep, winding the complex problems of her cases into a tight coil and then releasing the energy in a smooth fluid motion. She worked each problem with artistic relish, salivating against the foretaste of what a solution might yield: the effect wanted rubbed up against imaginary possibilities that evidence might support. Solutions that retained their potential were parked in a crevice of her mind for later withdrawal. Those without potential discarded into the neurostatic mix for another day. By the time she reached home, she had shaved fifty-four seconds off her personal best, and a plan for the day was forming like white, wispy clouds in a clear sky.

She showered and then worked over a breakfast of cereal with yogurt, an Arabic black coffee and a commercially packaged combination fruit juice, scribbling on loose leaves of A4 photocopy paper with a 2B pencil. Several sheets later, her bowl pushed aside and her coffee cup drained, she reviewed her summarised version. Chase up the forensics, a phone call, some emails, then a trip to SECSUR in time for the opening of their office, followed by a seizure of the vehicle in question; check on Lazaar and follow up a nagging thought about the wheelie bin victim's pathology. At the bottom of the page, in capital letters

with three underlines and a question mark were the words, THE GIRL.

The police forensics team uses a number of science labs for different analysis purposes. Active investigations are managed through the Forensics Centre at Midland usually under a triage practice to deal with demand and urgency. It was nigh-on impossible to game the triage system, and little could be achieved by currying favour of those who manage it. Under general investigation, it was usual for forensics reports to be loaded onto the IIS, flagging the investigating officers, who could then download the reports for their own uses.

For the examination of Lazaar's clothing, though, she bypassed the Forensics Centre and went directly to the man who ran the forensics sciences program at Curtin University, Professor Iain Methuen, another Scot and, whether because of his heritage or not, a close friend of McPherson's. A friendship on which she traded, and an action likely to darken the spreading blots in her copybook.

For the evidence she'd received from Smith and Jones, Boulter had taken the step to request a limited distribution of the findings, which meant the reports would be made available only to her and McPherson, as her immediate superior. When she logged on with her laptop, she learned that some reports were available, but there was a concern with the knife which was still being investigated. She raised her question about the wheelie bin victim and flagged it for the urgent attention of the pathologists and then downloaded the reports on the blood from the sneakers, the digital camera and the data associated with the image. There was no question, these were all pretty damning for Mahmoud Khalil: it was the victim's blood which appeared to be consistent with spatter patterns from similar crimes and Khalil's DNA inside the sneakers. The last

time they spoke, Lazaar, for reasons known only to him, asked her to have the photograph checked for any signs that another person was present, such as a face reflected from the window. There was nothing. Khalil's fingerprints were the only ones found on the camera, a good forefinger print taken from the shutter button along with both thumbs on the rear casing. This was reported as consistent with someone aiming the camera and taking pictures. The EXIF data gave the time as 12:31:12 on the morning of Saturday, 3rd August for the first image, with three subsequent images within the minute following.

She wondered what the remaining question over the knife was, and whether that would eventually show further damning findings or something that puts the case in jeopardy.

Her arrival at SECSUR was on the dot of eight, where she was informed by the pretty young girl at the reception desk that Sean Dower had left early that morning for Christmas Island. She asked after the flight details only to be informed that Mister Dower was a pilot himself and flew one of the company planes. He was expected in Derby around midday, and would then be flying on to Christmas Island the following day. She would later learn that the company provided security services for the Curtin Detention Centre at Derby and at Christmas Island. After that, she hit a brick wall.

Her inquiry as to the whereabouts and driver of a vehicle registered to the firm produced a burly young man in a perfectly fitted pin stripe suit, with a complexion so smooth it could have been Teflon. He proceeded to inform her that the information she sought, for security reasons, could not be divulged.

'Many of our clients,' he told her, 'are government ministers and high

ranking officials. I'm afraid we can't give out information about our operations. You could come back with a court order, but I have to warn you that may not be enough. The Official Secrets Act has jurisdiction.' As he spoke, the young man shepherded her towards the door and wished her a good day. It was a wholly unpleasant experience.

From her car, Boulter called Command Central and issued an alert for the vehicle. Both the driver and the vehicle were to be detained on sight as part of an ongoing inquiry into a death and possible abduction. There was no more information given. There were several messages on her phone. The first was from Art Lazaar, which she chose to ignore. A detective from Kensington asked if she could call in to the station sometime this morning for a chat. And McPherson demanded a meeting at eleven.

26

Tuesday 3 September — 4 days before the election

The mood of a hospital ward, at least from the patient's perspective, grows toward tedium in notches of inquiry into pain levels and bowel movements. A young doctor who, I judge by appearance and accent, had in recent times emigrated from the northern reaches of the African continent shows as much interest, on at least two occasions, in potential gaps that might exist in my general health as he does in my immediate predicament. I take it as a sign that my predicament is not nearly as dire as my internal monitoring suggests.

'Oh not at all,' he points out, 'your situation was quite critical for some hours' — critical here being a medical term as distinct from a literary one! — 'but your high blood pressure, cholesterol and slightly erratic heartbeat are matters of concern as well.'

I get the impression that Doctor Mboko has designs of jumping into surgical solutions while I am at my most vulnerable. He chooses to refrain from engaging in banter about either how he came to be a doctor, or my desire to be free from the restraint imposed by powerful pain killers and the tubular connections that feed them directly into my blood stream. Your body needs time to rest and recuperate, is his refrain.

And time itself languishes in hospital. I turn to delving into new depths of myself to a place, as Galway Kinnell might suggest, that is suddenly outside of myself, everywhere, digging a tunnel into my soul. My poetic nature frequently bubbles to the surface in times of great need, and I am in great need of escape.

Which is why I find myself flicking through television channels looking for anything other than politicians exhorting Australians to betray their basic humanity and invest their vote in building an impenetrable sea wall of border protection against the northern hordes. Ninety new refugees have arrived in the

time I spent unconscious, and three more boats intercepted this very Tuesday morning.

'Operation Sovereign Borders will stop this flood permanently,' LOTO insists, while TAPM — The Australian Prime Minister — is equally sure that their policy of new detention camps on Manus Island would keep them out in a more humanitarian way.

My annoyance in the language these party machines are using to peddle their ideology, in particular the repetitive rhetoric and the alarmist ramping that is clearly having a divisive effect on the voting population, grows with each utterance. News and current affairs commentators, rather than take a critical ear to it, are surfing the breaks that foam across the reefs of humanitarian sensibilities.

I switch the television off and turn my thoughts toward my own investigation. It takes less than a minute for me to decide on a quick and quiet phone call, in which I ask for a quiet and short visit: a matter needs shoring up.

Nick Fairgough has been in my room for about half an hour. He is dressed in jeans, a polo shirt and casual jacket: his preferred dress mode when he can avoid wearing his uniform. He hasn't brought me flowers and nor does he appear particularly sympathetic to my circumstances, but I do manage a smile or two among the grimaces over how they came about. Things grow a little more serious, though, on the subject of Wallace Lipschitz. I hit him with the question straight out of the blue.

'What have you got on him?'

I am dealing with a master of the long game. He knows the rules; knows

how to play; and the sidestep is his signature. 'I'm sorry … Lipschitz?'

'Yeah, Nick. Wally Lipschitz. What have you got on him?'

'Why would I have anything on him?'

'Because you're the police commissioner, and he's a university vice chancellor playing in the mud with some pretty dirty people.' He shifts on his feet. Not a big move, but a move that's been with him since I can remember. He's got something and he doesn't want to tell. Well, too bad, boyo, you're gonna tell. 'In case you hadn't noticed, Nick, I was beaten to within an inch of my life last Friday …'

'Yeah, Art, I get that. But I don't …' The head shake is another of his giveaways. Great negotiator, lousy poker player.

'Bullshit. You know something. If it wasn't for Lipschitz and his hundred-and-twenty thousand dollar car and foreign driver on fuck-knows-what pay scheme, it wouldn't have happened. Roger Lamord calls him up and gets him to deliver me. He calls him by his first name, too — did you know that?… he's the first person I've ever heard do that — so, they're either in bed together fucking each other and figuring out how they can fuck me, or they're in bed together fucking a whole load of others, probably you included. There's something tying this whole thing together and my gut tells me Lamord's got more than a little to do with it. And Lipschitz just might be how I can get to him. What have you got?'

'Are you saying, Roger Lamord is responsible?'

He has me there. 'I don't know Nick. And that's the worry, really. I had lunch with the man, all very pleasant, but it was a setup. Lipschitz was supposed to join us, but that was never the intention — no place set at the table. After

lunch, Lamord sends me downstairs where he says a car is waiting to take me back to campus. Fucking car was waiting all right. So was a thump in the head, followed by a whole chorus review of professional torture by a mob of sick fucks with fists like rock breakers and the latest manual on water torture.'

'Maybe it had nothing to do with Lamord.'

I close my eyes and wait while a shot of morphine dissolves a lingering headache. I sigh, exasperated. 'They knew I was there. Who else knew? Lamord, Lipschitz, whomever his driver was talking to in Croatian or something … I don't know, but they're in this thing. Just give me something, anything.'

'It's not going to help you.'

I slam my fist down on the bed. My heart monitor reacts with a series of irregular beeping noises. A nurse appears at the door, I wave her off. 'Nick, I don't care what you think. I need leverage and I know you've got it.'

His face clouds over in a carefully prepared, solemn look. 'I think it might be best to put your poetic licence on ice for a little while. That gadget over there with all its wires is suggesting that you're anything but well, and there are sensitive issues; potentially explosive.'

They are quite possibly his finest chosen words yet. Only it is me who is potentially explosive. 'What are you talking about? You want me to lie down and play nice until what?… Until the police wrap this up? Your police? The Kensington cops? That's not going to happen, Nick … the rot in your department is like gangrene. Christ! Kelly Boulter is working this case in secret because she can't trust the people in her own office, in her own team. She doesn't trust me either, but at least she knows what she gets. We need leverage, just give me what you've got.'

'This conversation can't go anywhere,' he admonishes. I agree.

'The Fraud Squad have just made a recommendation to the Crime and Corruption Commission to investigate a range of activities at your university. The allegations originally came from a concerned citizen. It's a rocky course, though. The CCC instructs the university to undertake an internal investigation first—' I guffaw and bite my tongue on the Dracula-running-the-blood bank cliché; Nick glowers and continues. 'Then, if the university uncovers anything untoward, it goes back to the CCC and they will proceed with corruption charges. It's likely to take years.'

I have my own ideas. 'Something like buying a BMW saloon on the campus credit card? Flogging off a parcel of land to some dodgy film studio?… He wants me to work there, did you know?'

Nick grins. 'Facetious bastard. But yes, credit card use, excessive balloon payments to retiring personnel who miraculously land seriously lucrative consulting roles, allocating land parcels to certain interests, a couple possibly including our other mate, some pretty dodgy overseas travel — of course I don't know many details, only what my command staff have briefed me on. I'll be taking it to the minister later in the month.'

'I imagine that might be tricky.'

'Depends a bit on how far up the chain it runs.'

I am thoughtful for a moment. Then I say, 'If Lamord is involved, I think you can safely assume the higher you climb the more slippery it's gonna be.'

'Maybe, but I—'

He doesn't get to finish what is on his mind because Kelly Boulter walks in.

It takes a moment for her to recognise who is in the room with me. They'd never met, but she knows straight away who he is. More surprisingly, he knows precisely who she is and spends a few minutes complimenting her, drawing on specific examples of work she has successfully accomplished in her career as a detective. It is one of the qualities that makes Nick Fairgough the man he is. He takes a moment to wish me well and excuses himself on the grounds of pressing business. And fires a parting comment: 'Whatever you need, Art. Just keep the rhyme simple.'

Boulter stands at the foot of my bed for some moments in silence. Recovering from her stupor, I imagine.

'So that's how you do it,' she says, her voice low and distant.

'Come again?'

'How you get involved, how you get away with things: it comes from Commissioner Fairgough … right from the top.' She emits a short, brittle laugh. 'You're fucken' unbelievable, Lazaar.'

I demur. 'No, Kelly, that's not it at all. Nick and I have been friends for thirty-five years, we're mates.'

'Right, which is why he said "what ever you need, Art." Don't bullshit me Lazaar—'

'He's a mate, he cares, which is more than you seem to be doing right now—'

'I saved your fucking life Lazaar, who cares more than that? Right now I'm beginning to regret that. I should have listened to McPherson and just left the investigation of it to Kensington Station, they should have a result in a year

or two.'

'Kelly, whether you like it or not, this is also about you. Someone is sending a message for you to leave well enough alone, are you just going to fold?'

'I'm beyond caring about you Lazaar. I'll do what McPherson wants — make the case against Mahmoud Khalil and be done with it. The evidence is there, it's a solid case. I'll get my promotion and be back in Major Crimes and you'll be long gone.'

'Only it's not is it? A solid case? You'd be perverting the course of justice, in which case you'll just be another one of them, and, trust me, they'll keep you wherever the bloody well they like. Something tells me you've got contradictory evidence. Does McPherson know?'

Before she can answer, her phone rings. I only get one side of the conversation, and that is at best semi-audible.

'Robinson?… Derby police, yes … Jesus! When?… Are there any details?… okay.… Well that's good news, at least … Tonkin Highway?… Sorry, who was the passenger?… And what?… to the airport?… okay … Yes take the vehicle to Maylands … every square inch, okay. Any word of Singh?… No, well keep digging … Belmont, right?… Okay, meet me there at one-thirty … no?… okay three o'clock then. And get a warrant for his address.' She disconnects and I look expectantly at her.

'What?' she demands. I hold my hands up, not speaking. 'No, Lazaar, you don't get to share in this.' She hesitates, as though contemplating whether to follow through with a next action. And then says, 'There is one thing though, I told Kensington that I would follow up on this.' She pulls a printed image from a folder and hands it to me.

I am staring at a grainy image of two big men manhandling a smaller man like a sack of flour into the back of a black four wheel drive. One of the men is significantly larger than the other, his profile offering a caricature nose that draws focus away from every other feature. The sack of flour is me. I look expectantly at Boulter.

'So much for your theories, Lazaar. This wasn't Roger Lamord's doing. Lamord's matre'd called Lipschitz's driver to collect you. This image was taken from her car's dash cam as she turned toward the lifts to get you.' She pauses while I intensify my study of the image. 'This is the clearest image from the camera', she says, pointing at the vehicle. 'The number plate is obscured, but I think I know it.' She points at big nose. 'How about this guy — you ever seen him before?'

'Can't say I have. I'm pretty sure I'd know. Who is he?'

'Don't know yet. Thought you might have a theory.' This last word is loaded with ice. 'After all that's what you do isn't it, make up theories? I'll stick to good old fashioned police work and you can stick your theories.' She reaches for the print. I keep hold of it. 'Fine, suit yourself. But just so you're clear, that ape there is not the cause of your situation Lazaar, you are. Sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong. I should have arrested you days ago. If I had I wouldn't be wasting my time with all this shit!'

At that, she turns on her heel and sweeps from the room, leaving me in stunned silence. Alone.

27

Sam Codlin called Lamord just as he was concluding a meeting. He excused himself from the boardroom, leaving his guests to depart under the guidance of his assistants and went through to his office, closing the doors behind him.

'I'd like a few minutes, Roger,' Codlin said. 'Is it okay if I come up?'

'Of course.'

Lamord was sitting behind his desk when she entered. The desktop was clear and he positioned himself central and upright as she settled into a chair opposite and placed a folder and notepad before her.

'What's up?' he asked.

'Sean's plane has gone missing,' she said, summoning up the perfect balance of sympathy and concern in her voice.

'Missing?'

'He was in Derby overnight, he left at six this morning. The last radio contact was at seven-eighteen. He was expected at Christmas Island at eight forty-five. There's been no contact and it's now nearly eleven. There's no sign of the jet, we have to assume it went down about a thousand kilometres out from Derby. I'm so sorry, Roger.'

Lamord sat in silence. At length, in a faraway voice, he said, 'Can you organise a presser, Sam? Something sensitive, just an announcement … maybe talk to someone at Seven, they've probably got some art they can use. This is terrible news. Terrible.'

Sam Codlin waited while Lamord turned in his seat and stared across the water. The midmorning sun was bright, pitching the water a deep blue with a crystal shimmer and a clear view to Rottnest, the island appearing high on a low tide. 'He was a good soldier,' she heard him say.

Then he swung round and faced her again. 'Anything else?'

'Yes, more bad news I'm afraid. Joe Swaddick has been arrested.'

'What?'

'I don't have any details. He hasn't been informed of any charges, apparently he's being held at Belmont Police Station awaiting questioning. I can tell you, although I haven't been informed, that Detective Sergeant Boulter put out a call to locate and detain his vehicle. I assume he was detained along with it.'

'Was there anyone else in the vehicle?'

'He was taking Yusuf to the airport. The police officers who impounded the vehicle arranged a taxi for him. His flight leaves in a few minutes.'

'Okay, leave it with me, I'll follow it up. That it?'

'More or less. I'm pretty confident of a win on Saturday, so I hope you're okay with me moving to Canberra.' She left an opening, but he didn't bite. She pressed on. 'I do, however, have some concerns about how we shut down the offshore business model — especially in the likelihood that we have lost Sean.'

Lamord shrugged, rolled his chair back, stood and faced the window with his arms folded. Eventually he turned his head and shoulders and peered at her. 'Not our concern Sam; it is only to win.'

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28

Boulter was late getting to McPherson's office and he was quick to point it out.

'Lateness seems to be a thing with you recently, lass.' She didn't respond. 'DPP is still waiting on instructions to prosecute Mahmoud Khalil.'

'Well, about that, Boss … We can't.'

'What do you mean, we can't?'

'The "evidence"'— hand signals accompanying the emphasis — 'is tainted.'

McPherson's brow lowered and his eyebrows linked together. 'In what way, exactly is it tainted, Detective? I thought you brought back a whole box of it from the Feds.'

'I did. And the reason I'm late for this meeting is because I needed to check that the chain of custody of that box, as you call it, hasn't been compromised.'

'Compromised?'

'Yes. As in fiddled with.'

'And …?'

'It hasn't.'

'Are you saying there were problems with the evidence that was handed to you?'

Boulter nodded. 'That's what it amounts to.' She handed over two sheets of paper and on a third, scribbled, *Better not talk about it in here?* and placed it on top of the other two.

McPherson looked at her and then scanned each of the pages beneath the note. Without looking up, he said, 'What do you suggest? We can't let him go?'

'Why not?'

'Because he's an illegal.'

Boulter found two more documents and held them in front of her. Mahmoud Khalil's identity and bridging visa. 'I received these the day after I got the box. They appear to be genuine.'

McPherson stood and walked around his desk. He stuffed the pieces of paper in a small leather carry bag and retrieved his coat from the rack by the door. 'Feel like a walk and a coffee?' he asked.

They occupied a corner courtyard table in a small coffee house along High Street. The morning was bright and sunny, but the air a crisp August cool, chilled by a gentle icy breeze wafting in from the east.

'So what's wrong with the evidence, lass?' McPherson eyed Boulter over his cup as he held it to his lips, his eyebrows once again mimicking hairy caterpillars head-to-tail on a long march.

'First, the red paint on the shoes doesn't match the paint found in the wheelie bin. The blood matches, the paint doesn't.'

McPherson's brow furrowed even further. 'Someone added paint to the crime scene because of the paint on the shoes?'

'I'd say that's about the size of it. My guess is that the perpetrators in this case intended to frame Khalil all along — they had the shoes and wanted to make sure all the pieces fit.'

'Maybe Khalil thought he could fool us by including the paint, perhaps to mask the blood on his shoes. That alone doesn't exonerate Khalil.'

'Yeah, look Boss, I know it would be nice and neat, but I really don't think Khalil did this. The paint on the shoes is older than the blood. We wouldn't

know this had I not asked for further analysis on the shoes.'

'I didn't see that information on *eye-is*. Why did you?'

'I deliberately kept it off the system until I could talk to you. It's that first page you're holding.' She braced for the admonishment, but McPherson was reading. He looked up and waited for her to continue.

'Khalil has denied any involvement in this, and let's face it, that's what you'd expect from any perp, but I needed to be sure our case didn't have any holes, so I thought some aspects needed re-examining.'

'Why the shoes?'

'It seemed too convenient.'

'Okay. But why not log it in the forensics file?'

'The same reason we're out here discussing this, sir, and not in the office. I'd rather not tip our hand at this stage.'

'Tip to whom?'

'That's the magic question, isn't it Superintendent? You acted on a tipoff, which, in my opinion, was highly suspect.' She waited. 'Some might think I'm taking a risk even discussing it with you.'

'Is that what you think?'

'I'm discussing it with you, aren't I?'

He nodded and turned to the second report. 'I take it this one's not on *eye-is* either?'

McPherson put the second report down before him and stared across the table at Boulter.

'I asked the pathologist for more detail on the knife,' she explained.

'That's what they found … the knife supposedly recovered from Khalil's home was not the weapon used to cut the victim's throat.'

'But it had the victim's blood on it, and Khalil's fingerprints.' McPherson pointed to a detail on the page. '"The knife is not sharp enough to make a cut like this" … could it have been blunted after?'

'Not without some evidence. The knife that was used in this attack was so sharp that hardly any pressure at all was required to separate the tissue surrounding the arteries and windpipe. But there would be tearing on either side of the wound if it had been the one we have in evidence. You can also see that trace evidence was left in the wound …'

McPherson screwed his face up. 'Are we sure about this, lass? It seems a bit of a stretch to me.'

'Trace DNA can be isolated at several levels these days, and it can be recovered from very small transfers. If I touch something, then you touch it, then someone else touches the same thing, the DNA from the oils on our skin can reliably be recovered; each of us can be identified. What's more, a non-porous surface, like a knife blade, can transfer as much as ninety-five percent of DNA. And when the biological material is saliva, DNA recovery can be higher than other sources such as skin oils, semen, and even blood.'

'DNA from saliva in the wound, apparently transferred from the knife? What the fuck would the killer's saliva be doing on his knife?'

'It's not just the saliva, sir. Look at note five there: it says traces of saliva mixed with a very fine machine oil. This guy sharpens his knife. He uses spit on an oilstone. Now tell me, sir, what kind of murderer is that meticulous with his tools?'

McPherson was thoughtful. 'But we could still present a case against Khalil, and then it's done.'

'Well, sir, if you want an expedient result you might try it. But my signature won't be going on it. I support the notion put forward by Robinson the other day — that it's highly unlikely one man could have done this. We have found no evidence of collaborators. And, circumstantially, I can't see Mahmoud Khalil for this either; this forensic report supports that position. This was an execution by persons who knew the ground.'

'I don't know, lass. As evidence goes, this looks pretty flimsy from where I sit. If you want a fast ticket back to Midland, it would be best to sign it off and leave this new stuff off *eye-is* …'

Boulter's patience was beginning to wear thin. It's one thing to walk away from an investigation, but another to push for a just result. And McPherson was clearly not going to allow that to happen easily. She wanted to know if he could be trusted. Maybe he's simply testing me.

'You know Khalil has a lawyer, sir?' she said.

'Who?'

'Ron Cando.'

'How the fuck can he afford that?'

'Compliments of Art Lazaar, I believe. Which means Wriggly will be their chosen brief if it gets to that.'

'Jesus! Boulter. I'll have that cunt for interfering in police business if it's the last thing I do.'

'Might be a bit of a challenge after what I learnt this morning, Superintendent.'

'I want to formally interview him under caution,' Boulter announced, making a careful note of the time.

'Interview who, exactly?' McPherson asked.

'Lazaar, of course.'

'Oh.' McPherson seemed momentarily nonplussed. 'Why's that, lass? I thought we were talking about the limestone cave-in and this person of interest who's done a disappearing act. What's Lazaar's connection to that?'

'This is all about a girl.'

McPherson let out a small laugh, as if to dismiss the idea altogether. 'I thought he was gay.'

'I understand, sir, but please bear with me. We got this wrong right from the start—'

'We? Who's the "we" in this, Boulter?' Clearly he wasn't shouldering the responsibility.

'All of us, sir. There are some things I still haven't told you.' She fished around in a folder and drew out two plainly typed pages and an 8x10 photograph. 'These are forensic reports that have been conducted by Ian Methuen at Curtin University — I probably traded a few favours you've yet to earn, but …' She handed the pages to him. 'The first is a comparison of some dog hairs found on the wheelie bin victim's clothes with ones found on Lazaar's after his beating. In each case, they were found on the shoulder and hip sections of their clothes, suggesting the transfer happened when they were lying on one side.' She pointed to the picture. 'You can see from that image that Lazaar is being hoisted, apparently unconscious, into the back of a vehicle. The hairs came from the

same dog and I'm willing to bet my transfer back to Midland on this vehicle being where the dog hairs came from.'

McPherson studied the report. 'Okay, Ian's top notch so there's no reason to doubt his findings. This other one …'

'There was a graze on the wheelie bin victim's forehead. It puzzled me, so asked the pathologist to have another look at it and then got Methuen to compare their report with Lazaar's medical report. You can see that he has come to the conclusion that the same kind of nylon webbing was used for the same purpose on both victims. Used to pull their heads back — Lazaar's while he was waterboarded, and the wheelie bin victim's while his throat was sliced. Khalil was in gaol when Lazaar was bashed.'

McPherson was thoughtful. 'So what did you mean when you said it was all about a girl?'

'The reason Lazaar contacted me in the first place was to arrange protection for a girl he says is the wheelie bin victim's sister. He reckoned she was at risk of being attacked too. I dismissed the whole thing, but now I think Lazaar, especially after this morning, knows more than he's letting on. I didn't tell you earlier, but the feds I met, those who gave me the box of evidence, also demanded I tell them the whereabouts of the girl. Of course I had no idea and told them so, and then just put it out of my mind. But now I realise that everyone is looking for the girl.'

She watched McPherson as he sat quietly, mulling things over in his head. At length he said, 'When will you interview him?'

'Tomorrow morning, at the hospital.'

29

Wednesday 4 September — 3 days before the election

I receive a call from Detective Robinson at about 9:30 asking if Boulter is with me. I am curious and ask why he thinks she would be, given that I had spent much of the previous day in frustrated attempts to get her to talk to me, hoping we might reset where we left off. But there has been no response to my calls.

'She told Superintendent McPherson that she intended to interview you this morning. I just thought she might be there.'

'Interview me?' my tone is deliberately equivocal.

'I'm sorry Doctor Lazaar, I don't know the details.'

'Bit of a worry if you don't know where she is?'

'I'm sure there's a simple explanation.' And he hangs up before I can dig any further.

I'm sure there is, but I dislike the feeling crawling around in my belly. If there's one thing that can be said about Kelly Boulter, it is that she is utterly dependable; she simply does not go off docket. I sit my head back on the pillow, close my eyes, and reflect on the events of yesterday after Boulter's stormy exit.

First, the report that Sean Dower had disappeared somewhere in the Indian Ocean, about halfway between Derby and Christmas Island. Boulter had been wanting to talk to him, but it appears she failed in that.

Channel Seven ran the item on its midday bulletin as breaking news.

Chief Executive Officer of major security company's plane goes missing on flight from Derby in WA's north west en route to Christmas Island. Sean Dower, Managing Director of national security firm SECSUR, was on a routine visit to Curtin and Christmas Island detention centres where his company supplies security services for the government. His plane left Derby shortly before six o'clock this morning and was expected in Christmas Island before nine a.m. All radio contact with the flight ceased

about an hour after take off. Mister Dower is an experienced pilot who frequently flies to remote operations. He was alone on the company jet and there are fears for his survival.

An image of a group of men appears on screen and then focuses into a mid shot of Dower. The shot is obviously from Channel Seven archives and appears to be taken from an event at The Vines golf course. What piques my interest is the company he was in.

Fortunately the television in my room is one of those modern ones with the ability to replay and capture recent broadcast segments. I negotiate the correct button technology to review the previous minute, which is enough to see the group of men in which Sean Dower is situated. It is an interesting tableau to say the least. In clear view are Roger Lamord and the Malaysian Prime Minister at a golf tee. Dower's image is highlighted, in the foreground of the shot, standing behind the tee in the company of a man I have seen before — driving a black Mercedes Benz away from the Railway hotel over a year ago. My guess is that this is Yusuf Ababbas, or Tuah Johari, brother-in-law to the Malaysian PM's wife. And framing the left hand side of the image is an arm wearing a distinctive watch, a single shoulder with a lapel badge I would recognise anywhere, and part of the face of Wallace Lipschitz.

In my room, Boulter took a call from Detective Robinson — I gleaned that much from the half of the conversation I'd overheard — along with the arrangement to meet at Belmont at 3:00 o'clock. A car impounded and someone or something at Belmont. Whose address did she ask a warrant for?

I then move onto wondering whether the events that Donna Gardner called

about just as I'd finished my lunch yesterday might have something to do with it. Her call is hushed and anxious.

'Those two AFP officers who were here the other day returned this morning with a warrant. They searched your room and left with several boxes, your desktop computer and your laptop.'

'What? And you let them in?' The boredom of hospital automatically amplifies the querulousness of my tone.

'I had no choice, Art. They were accompanied by a campus security officer, and the VC instructed them to comply with the warrant.'

'I'll bet he did. Was anyone present during the search looking after my interests?'

'I was there for most of it. I felt a bit violated to be honest.'

I take that to be a good sign. 'Did they say what they were looking for?'

'It was all a bit vague. They said something about you having evidence connected to someone they wanted to talk to. Something to do with fraud and corruption. They didn't elaborate.' The line goes quiet and I sense that there is more to come.

'What, Donna?' I prompt.

'The VC has suggested you take extended leave.' This time the silence is thunderous.

'Has he indeed?' is about all I can muster by way of response. At that moment, a sudden thought is leaden in my belly. 'I'm going to have to call you back, Donna. I'll need to contact my union rep and talk to a lawyer.'

'Of course, Art. But I will need to make arrangements.'

I no sooner hang up than I dial Lavender Jensen. She answers on the

second ring. There is no time to explain. 'Lavender, grab the package and head south. Now.'

I hang up before she can respond. We'd discussed it. She knows what to do. Her father lives on a property in deep forest near Denmark on the southern coast. It is far away and isolated and as safe a place as any for Falullah for the time being.

I call Wi Fi after that. He assures me that there is no need to worry about the security of our guest's admission, and if the Smith and Jones raid happened to collect the USB with the files Hunter had supplied me from the secret compartment in my top drawer, they will be in for a surprise. He has loaded it with a malware code which boots invisibly as soon as the USB is plugged into a computer. Unless it meets a handshake code on the host computer, the virus immediately locks the computer into which it is installed, infects its network with a paralysing code, and a false message and link to a ransom agent in Russia. The laptop removed from my room is my campus issued one; the notebook from Hunter is still with Wi Fi.

I am studying the image of my abduction that Boulter left with me.

The guy doing the heavy lifting is a big man with a face like a sack of busted arseholes, his head as over-sized and gnarled as the bole on an ancient beech tree. Although the image is grainy, it appears that he has a full mouth of even teeth. But, by far, the most prominent feature is the nose: a caricature in itself that even the most gifted caricaturist could not exaggerate any more than nature has already done so. In searching for this man, surely all one has do is ask about the burly Italian with the nose — anyone having ever seen him will know

him.

As I try to focus my mind on how I might find him, multitudes of loose threads bombard me. Among the chaos, one thing stands clear: I can find neither Boulter nor my assailant from in a hospital.

While I wait on a schedule of drugs and a discharge form, I set about planning what to do, arriving at a decision that, again, it is time for some poetic licence.

Wi Fi meets me at the front of the hospital. I limp to his waiting car where he hands me a new mobile phone and the notebook computer I'd left with him, and a USB with the full Channel 7 clip I'd seen on television the day before. I want the footage as evidence of the connection between Lipschitz and Yusuf Ababbas, although I have no idea if it will ultimately hold any leverage. Still, it feels good to have.

'All of your accounts at work have been suspended,' Wi Fi is saying as he inserts his ignition key, 'including your security access to buildings, your office and any classrooms.'

'Jesus!'

'I mean … if they're open, they're open and it doesn't mean you can't walk in. But security has been alerted and, unless you're carrying a pass issued that day by the chancellery, they have instructions to escort you from the grounds.'

'And do you know what it is I'm supposed to have done?'

'Nothing's been announced. There's been a bit of email traffic between the VC and the Deputy Provost discussing what they should say. She's leaning toward some kind of sexual harassment. She's sounded Donna Gardner out on the possibility and believes she knows someone willing to support the claim.'

'What does *he* say?'

'He agrees, only …'

'Yes?'

'He'd like to be sure he can get rid of you and has suggested some form of improper academic behaviour — something that falls under fraud and corruption.'

The same words Donna Gardner used. I am thoughtful while he crosses Murdoch Drive and heads for the car park where I left my car the previous Friday. 'Not fucking around, are they? When was the last email?'

'About nine this morning.'

Right before the Smith and Jones raid on my office. Utter bastards. The whole fucking lot of them. 'And the phone?' I ask, holding it up.

'Same as the last one, but with a new number. Anyone trying to contact you with your old number will be routed to a voicemail. The link is in the phone.'

'Thanks,' I say as we reach my car. I climb down, suppressing the pain, thank him again and close the door.

30

I drive — although the feeling is much more like floating above the road — to Fremantle and my room at the Esplanade Hotel. It appears untouched except for housekeeping's daily visits.

My first call is to Nick Fairgough. I catch him between meetings and explain quickly what I need. It takes about fifteen minutes before I get a return call from a Commander Novice. He is all business.

'The person detained at Belmont was a Joseph Swaddick,' he is saying as I scribble. 'Detective Sergeant Boulter had issued a detain request for a VOI and its driver as a POI. It was stopped on Tonkin Highway by two officers from Belmont station. The vehicle was taken to Maylands for forensic testing. The Commissioner has requested an urgent process. There was a passenger in the vehicle. The arresting officer's report identifies him as Tan Sri Tuah Johari, a diplomat from Malaysia who was being driven to the airport. The officers called a taxi and he left on a flight for Kuala Lumpur shortly before midday.'

My involuntary expletive interrupts the commander's flow, but I urge him to continue.

'Detective Sergeant Boulter arrived at Belmont station at three o'clock only to learn that Swaddick was removed from the station by two AFP officers at about one-thirty p.m. The custody documents were signed by an agent Smith.' I laugh, a kind of fucking-knew-it grunt. Novice continues. 'She left a few minutes later and hasn't been heard from since. Calls to her mobile phone have gone unanswered. Its tracker is inactive, so it appears to be switched off or destroyed.

'You asked about the Parry Street explosion …' There is a pause while Novice turns a page. 'Her *eye-is* notes indicate that early in the piece she talked to a street kid called Spider who she later notes as the one who identified the vehicle

she had impounded. This kid says there were two groups searching for someone called Hunter. One group was in this vehicle, the other group unknown, except …' The pause makes me feel Novice has noticed something. 'There is a flag on this as late as yesterday morning with an image of a guy with probably the ugliest nose I have ever seen … does that make any sense to you?'

'Is this guy identified?'

'No. Do you know who he is?'

'It's one of the guys who mugged me. I'm the sack of potatoes in the picture … if you're seeing the whole image.'

'I've just got the head shot. Anyway, this kid Spider might be one lead to follow up, but there's no information on how to contact him. The commissioner has authorised three PCSOs' — plain clothes special officers — 'to work with you. You don't need to know their names. They will meet you in the atrium of your hotel at four o'clock. The commissioner wishes you all the best on this, but asked me to remind you that it is deniable.'

'Thanks. One more thing … is there any mention in Boulter's notes about the photograph of the murder found on the camera in Mahmoud Khalil's possession?'

I hear a few mouse clicks and then, 'Yes, the forensics examination found no image, reflected or otherwise, of any person in the picture other than the victim.'

'Thanks.' I breathe a sigh of relief.

Apart from tracking down Spider, one other possible lead did present itself to me. I wonder if any of the kitchen staff saw something on Friday, or might recognise

Big Nose. I decide to check with Kensington police. The detective working on my case tells me they found no one to identify him. They had asked at Balsamic & Olives, he says. Nothing. They'd canvassed Fremantle detectives. Nothing. They circulated the image on IIS to all other stations. Nothing. How could that be? How could a thug so big, so ugly, not be recognised? It could only be that he was brought in for a specific job by someone. Who? Lamord? And then the penny dropped. The one person searching for Hunter — especially once his cover was blown — not that he'd know now, poor bastard. The pieces in my mind implode like a jigsaw interlock. *Click!* Enzo Gordioni.

Four o'clock is still some distance away. I call down to the lobby and secure a private meeting room for the hour to five, and then sit, staring at the phone. There are two calls that have to be made, the only decision is the order in which to make them.

I call Donna Gardner.

'Art, I've been waiting for your call back.'

'I'm sure you have Donna. They're setting me up, you know that, right?'

'You know I can't comment, Art. I'm your line manager and right now I'm looking at a report from a PID' — public interest disclosure — 'officer that names you as someone who has acted improperly. My duty is to inform you of a mandatory suspension from duties and that you must register at the chancellery if you come on site. Any breach of this will be considered an offence under the act.' Her officious tone rankles.

'This is bullshit, Donna. What am I supposed to have done?'

'A copy of the PID report has been mailed out to you.'

'I'm not at home, Donna. Tell me.'

'It claims you traded sexual favours for grades. That brings the integrity of the university into disrepute.' A cold, articulated summary. No feelings. No judgement.

An edge creeps into my voice like a scythe against a medieval cornstalk. 'First he has me fucking mugged and now trumped up charges …' And then my brain is momentarily numb. This is a squeeze, a turning of the screw. Lipschitz is doing *his* bidding. Elise Jarman doing his. And Donna Gardner doing hers. 'Donna, I need you to get a meeting with Lipschitz tomorrow afternoon.'

'I'm not sure he'll want to see you.'

'I'm bloody sure he won't. Don't mention me. Cook up something — school business, private, urgent, his office. Let me know the time, I'll step in, you step out.'

'I don't know, Art …'

'Donna, whose fucking side are you on here? You know this is bullshit. Lipschitz knows it's bullshit; Elise Jarman certainly knows it's bullshit because she's the one cooking the charges. For him! This whole thing is fucking corrupt. Why would you support it?'

A different silence clings to the connection. A silence of veering. Is there a trackmaster lurking down the line, waiting to switch tracks, to derail and redirect? Her voice returns. It is soft, a whisper.

'I'll do what I can.' And the line is dead.

I wait. I pace. I challenge my mind to be in the right place. This next call depends upon stoicism, upon unbridled reserve, dignity of the right, integrity of lost causes. It is all about loss. And finding again. I use the number he gave me. He

answers on the second ring.

'Roger Lamord.'

'Roger,' I say with far greater enthusiasm than I ever imagined I could have, 'Art Lazaar here. I'm calling to enquire as to whether your friend had any success in recovering what it was that was lost. You see, I've been a little indisposed …' I had often wondered whether these rich arseholes actually spoke with this kind of affected air.

'Yes I heard about that.' His tone is matter-of-fact. Businesslike. 'You do understand that I had nothing to do with it?'

'Of course. It was all recorded on a camera. Fortunately. Although, I'm not sure you get off completely Scott free.' Tread lightly. I'm self-counselling now. Small steps. No need to eat the world.

'I'm sure I don't understand. What is it you want, Lazaar? I am busy.'

'Far be it for me to waste your time. I've lost something, Roger. I'm wondering if you know the whereabouts.'

'I thought lost-and-found was your art.'

'In theory, in a manner of speaking. But this may be something more up your alley. A police officer has gone missing, last seen seeking an audience with someone connected to you. I'd like to find her.'

'There are a lot of people connected to me. I don't know anything about a missing police officer.'

'Oh, don't misunderstand me, I'm quite sure you don't. Joseph Swaddick. Does that name mean anything to you?' Fishing, my grandfather used say, was about the right hook, the right bait and watertime — he always said it as one word. Watertime is the ebb and flow. You need to feel it in your toes first.

'Can't say it does.'

'Well, that's a worry … let's just say,' I pause, as though it is a moment before closing a deal, 'that Swaddick is employed by one of your companies—'

'A lot of people employed by my companies—'

'I know that Roger. One or two fewer in recent days … but if I can continue,' a pause against stock-still silence, 'I was going to say by one of your companies which has recently lost its managing director under what could only be described as tragic and mysterious circumstances, and I understand he was very close to you—'

'Best to contact the human resources department in the company for an answer to your question. In the meantime, my friend is still waiting for the return of their loss.'

'Hasn't that friend already left the country, Roger?' Then I think, perhaps, he talks about a different friend. 'Although I'm curious,' I continue, 'how did' — an emphasis here to indicate a level of certainty I cannot prove — 'Enzo Gordioni know I was dining in your restaurant last Friday?'

'I'm sure I couldn't say. Now if you're done?…'

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31

Come four o'clock and I'm ensconced with my three PCSOs in a small meeting room on the mezzanine floor of the Esplanade Hotel, an elegant colonial affair that stands on the first site used for housing convicts transported from Great Britain to Fremantle, facing Esplanade Park and the fishing boat harbour beyond. My PCSOs comprise two male and one female who go by the names Peter, George, and Jo respectively. Not their real names, rather monikers that serve for quick and direct communications over the next few days and aiding a shared capacity to forget we ever met should we run across each other any time in the future. Our primary mission is to find Kelly Boulter. Although I have some secondaries to add to that and have brought up the names Swaddick and Big Nose, and thrown Smith and Jones into the mix as well.

'So exactly how many baddies are we looking for?' Peter has the kind of drawl most often associated with a wise and seasoned craftsman, careful, measured, a product of a youth spent in a rural culture.

I try, unsuccessfully, to match the measure. 'Hard to say, Pete. Kelly was working in pretty muddy waters here. Her key case is a murder for which her nick has a guy in custody they'd like it to be. But she was having doubts. Things didn't add up. It's very possible she found evidence that makes their choice implausible. But there's also the Parry Street explosion. Two people died, one's missing, and there seems to be a link to the murder, still a bit of a theory though, until something shows up to confirm. Then there's my mugging, officially out of her hands, but I know Boulter, and she was determined to clock the guy who did it. But that's only because she likes me. And was chasing down some evidence that links that to our murder.' My pause gives George an opportunity to wedge in. His voice is nasal with the hangover of a central London accent.

'So, just the five, then? The murderer, who you reckon is not the guy

in custody; the guy driving the car seen at the Parry Street explosion, who was arrested and has now gone missing courtesy of these two feds; and the guy who decked you in the car park of that fancy restaurant, yeah? Although the same badun could have a hand in more than one, couldn't he? Which one's grabbed our missing detective, then?'

Peter again: 'Thoughts on where we start?'

Jo had sat quietly, listening while swiping through her ipad, jotting a note or two on an open notebook before her. I marvel at this quiet multitasking. 'Commander Novice suggested a chat with this street kid, Spider,' she says, before looking up at me. 'We'll leave that to you.' I nod. She continues. 'I'm going to have a chat to McPherson, and Boulter's team, at the local nick. I want to know more about her meeting with the Super yesterday, like why did they leave the building? And why wasn't the warrant Sergeant Boulter asked for actioned? Why this other detective didn't meet her at Belmont. Peter, see if you can track down these AFP plods and find out their story — I'm as interested in their raid on Art's office as I am in their sudden appearance at Belmont. George, the car, eh? Keep in touch.'

Peter and George leave. The door closes behind them with a click. Jo had not moved. Not a finger. Not until my full attention was given and she'd read beneath my eyes.

'I'm not convinced you've told me everything. Things you've left out, or maybe things skewed for a particular way of seeing. Why did Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum raid your office? Why did they take advantage of your lying in a hospital bed? Why were you lying in a hospital bed? How does that connect to Kelly Boulter's disappearance? These things are done at someone's bidding, Art. Do you know the someone?'

'I have my suspicions. I think it's more than one, and on the surface for different motives, but odd things tie them together.' I open the file showing the footage that Channel 7 used for its news report on the disappearance of Sean Dower, and put it in front of her. 'What do you make of this?'

She looks, clicks, rewinds, looks, pauses, studies. 'Do you know these people?'

I point. 'Roger Lamord. I had lunch with him last Friday at his fancy restaurant across the river. He wasn't responsible for my mugging — at least, not directly.' Point again. 'Wallace Lipschitz, Vice Chancellor of my university, whose driver took me to that lunch, and whose dashboard camera caught a few moments of my abduction.' Another point. 'Sean Dower, whose plane ended up in the middle of the Indian Ocean yesterday morning, with him in it we presume. The one about to tee off is the Prime Minister of Malaysia, with whom I believe Lipschitz and Lamord were cooking up some deal for a campus in Malaysia and special opportunities for Malaysian students here. The one at the back, on the other side of Dower is, I suspect, his wife's brother-in-law, Tuah Johari, also known as, I believe, Yusuf Ababbas. The bodyguards, I don't know, although I suspect one of them is Joseph Swaddick.'

'So what links them?'

'Money for sure … at least where Lamord, Lipschitz and the Malaysian PM are concerned. Maybe political interests, I don't know. I think this Tuah Johari is an important link, but he's done a bunk so my guess is we'll never know.'

'Two other names have come up in conversations I've had: Enzo Gordioni and Calvin Bishop.' Her look has *your turn* etched across her forehead.

'Boulter claims a picture taken at an ATM the night before the Parry

Street explosion is Cal Bishop. Cal Bishop died ten years ago. But my guess is that somehow Gordioni has been informed of this. I think he was behind my mugging with some twisted idea that I can lead them to Bishop.'

'How would this supposition of Boulter's have leaked to Gordioni?'

'Fucked if I know, Jo. Find that out and we might find Kelly.'

She leaves; I sit in deep frustration from the pressure of keeping secrets, imagining that the minute I tell all, it will be over. More people will die. People I love. People I care about. While the killers just keep on killing. How's the election shaping up? I suddenly wonder. Last I saw, the boats are still coming, Manus Island will be under flood within weeks under TAPM's plan. LOTO vowing loudly in tweet after tweet that he will turn 'em back. We will make our borders safe.

I find Spider a little before midnight, after walking and rewalking the streets of Fremantle, poking my head round dark corners and into hidey holes only the homeless know about, shelling out over a hundred bucks to would-be informers, all capable of peddling a story with a rare politician's skill, but only one of whom with a clue about the kid's whereabouts. Desperation has no place for distinguishing between truth and lies. What chances their bullshit will be called to account? What chance I'll ever see them again? What's a $20 scam when you've got nothing? The guy standing next to Spider got $30, but at least he told the truth.

'What do y' want wiv me?' Spider demands. 'You don' look like y' need gear. Anyway, if y' do, I ain't got'ny.'

'No,' I say, 'it's not about gear. I'm wondering if you've seen a friend of mine, a police officer, she's gone missing.'

The kid standing nearby, the one who scored the $30, pipes up, hand over his loins in a lewd gesture: 'I seen 'er man, an' she don' wanna see you.' And he bursts into an uncontrollable giggle.

I beckon Spider to move away where we can talk a bit more privately. 'You know Detective Kelly Boulter?'

'Yeah. She a nice lady.'

'When did you see her last?'

'I seen her yesterday.'

'What time yesterday did you see Detective Boulter?'

'Why y' wanna know, man?'

'She's gone missing.'

'Maybe she wanted to.'

'Spider, what do you know?'

'I don' know nufink …'

'Listen, you like Kelly Boulter, right? Help me here. Why did she see you yesterday?'

'You know Hunter, right? Yeah you know 'im, I seen you wiv 'im. Well she arks me to spread the word that I seen Hunter since the explosion, an' I know where to fin' him.'

'You've seen Hunter?'

'No I 'aven't seen him. She jus' arks me to tell people I 'ad — an' I know where to fin' him.'

I move closer to an artificial self. The self that comes along just as the real me begins to tread water. 'Well, that is a bit of a worry, Spider; why did she want you to do that if it's not true? For all we know, Hunter is dead.'

'Nah, man. He ain't dead. He jus' don't look like 'e used to.'

'So you have seen him?'

'Nah, 'aven't seen 'im. Guys been lookin' for him, but. First it was them guys at the explosion — soldier lookin' guys wiv dogs goin' roun' bustin' everyone on the street to tell 'em where to find him. They don' know shit these guys — you don' find Hunter, 'e finds you. But I fink she was lookin' for one of them. Then there's these Italian guys, fucken' thugs. They jus' fuckin' animals, man. An' guess what? So after I spread the word, the Italians were back las' night. The Soldier guy was with one of them, but not in 'is car. No dogs neiver.'

I fish out a picture of Big Nose from my pocket and hold under the light from a nearby street lamp. 'This guy one of them?'

Spider squints, turns his head sideways, then to the other side as if he could get a clearer view. 'Yeah, 'e wus there. 'e was the one wiv the soldier guy. That's a fucken' ugly honk, but ay?' And he laughs.

'Did you tell any of them where to find Hunter?'

'Nah. Not me. But some of my bruvvers did.' He glances in the direction of other members of his gang.

I fish a crisp fifty dollar note out of my pocket and hold it. 'And where did they tell them to look?'

Spider eyes the money and reaches for it. 'There's a crib in bush under the railway bridge on Tydeman Road. Tol' 'em they would fin' 'im there.'

'Thanks Spider.' I release the note.

'I hope she orright, man. She a good lady.' And he melts into the dark in company of his gang.

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32

Thursday 5 September — 2 days before the election

'So, let's just see if we can get this straight.' It's breakfast and Jo is talking while crunching muesli between her teeth, and I sense she's musing on the strangeness of what she's just been told. 'Sergeant Boulter gets this homeless kid to spread the word around the street, and within hours there are people with violent intent looking for this guy who's supposed to have been somehow involved in the Parry Street explosion because they need him … for what?'

'There's two camps,' I say, pointing at the 10x8 of my mugging. 'This guy, Big Nose, I suspect is working for Enzo Gordioni. They want Hunter because they think he's someone else—'

'And is he?'

'No. And the other guy, the one the kid describes as a soldier, I'm certain is Joseph Swaddick. He'd been ordered to find Hunter by Sean Dower. But Dower's dead, so he must be getting his orders from somewhere else. Whoever it is must believe Hunter knows something about the murder Boulter is investigating — something I suspect puts them in the frame.'

'And does he?'

'Can't say.'

'So where is this Hunter guy?' Peter asks, his drawl flying low over the susurrus of the room. 'Did he cause the explosion and disappear?' He makes a conjuring motion with his hands to cement the image.

'He's been missing since the explosion,' I hear myself say, 'but that doesn't mean he's not dead under the rubble. They still haven't cleared it all.' Was I defending him? Clearing him of all blame? Wondering about my own culpability in it all? I lose myself in the depths of my coffee cup as the others continue to share what they learnt.

I miss much of it, but the items under discussion include the impounded vehicle, which has been detailed and yielded little except a few dog hairs in the cracks behind the seats. Forensics have apparently drawn a preliminary match to two other sets of hairs submitted earlier by Boulter. Of Smith and Jones, nothing can be found. These two agents of the AFP, as they like to call themselves, are not in the personnel records of the agency. The vehicle they used to collect Swaddick from the Belmont lockup is a nondescript white Toyota Aurion with plates that has no record at the Department of Transport. It seems no-one at Belmont thought to verify the order to remove the suspect. At that point I drift off into wondering about the whereabouts of the university's property removed from my office.

According to Robinson, Boulter's request for a warrant to search Swaddick's house was actioned, but McPherson claimed never to have seen it for authorisation and execution. The system had clearly been at fault. Robinson didn't meet Boulter at Belmont to question Swaddick because he had been dispatched urgently to another job. McPherson's diary entry shows that it was Boulter who requested they remove their meeting from the office to a coffee shop up the road. The best lead to Boulter's whereabouts, Jo informs us, is the information I got from Spider. She decides that we concentrate on the railway bridge at Tydeman Road.

I park in the Railway Hotel car park. It seems most logical because the railway bridge crosses Tydeman Road right next to it, where the rail lines separate into three. Two main lines run straight across to handle the commuter rail traffic between Perth and Fremantle; the one that veers wraps round the back of the

hotel leading to a borderland of freight yards with banks of containers and razor-topped security fences. A short rise from the rear of the hotel leads to an extensive piece of vacant land, now likely used as overflow parking, but scattered remnants of broken tarmac suggest a more industrial past. Nestled into an embankment with a four-metre high, heavily graffitied concrete wall fencing off the railway line, are several outbuildings separate from the main hotel complex. They are behind a locked gate and spike-topped fencing. Two German Shepherds prowling the yard make it known I'm not welcome.

George has taken a small triangle of bush between the hotel and the railway line, Jo a section, also bush, on the other side of the bridge, and Peter is scouring the area on the river side of Tydeman Road. I make my way up the rise and come to a dilapidated fence that borders the railway reserve. Finding an opening, I push through and follow the concrete wall until it ends about fifty metres along and becomes a fence of steel posts and chain-link wire, long fallen into disrepair with sections of the wire cut away and poles bent as though standing against a terrible wind. Beyond the fence is an embankment with the continuing railway line. I push through a break in the wire, climb the embankment and cross the track to the other side. The fence on this side is far taller: a modern, well maintained chain-link and steel affair with razor-wire spiralling its full length. It protects a freight hardstand, populated with islands of shipping containers stacked four high in parts, clearly organised in some fashion understandable only to the world of the forwarders. A number of containers, which appear to be long settled in-situ, are arranged parallel to the fence. Two, next to each other, are directly in front of me, the first a rust-stained and grubby white, and the one behind it, a dirty red, both are faded and weathered by salt and age, long

decommissioned from the ocean. At the end, there's a space, wide enough for a vehicle, and then another two containers, much newer looking, stacked together, and farther along, another. In the gap there is a car. I stop and study it for a moment, and then a realisation dawns. I am staring at the headlights and grille of Kelly Boulter's car.

I break into a run, heading along the fence, hoping a gate to the yard is at the end. But it isn't. The fence turns without a gate, isolating it from a large complex for the handling and distribution of sugar, and disappears into the distance.

'Jo, I've located Kelly's car,' I rasp into my communicator, 'in a yard on the other side of the railway line behind the hotel. I can't get to it from here, I'm at Barker Street cul-de-sac. I think the only access must be from the other end at Irene Street. I'm heading that way.'

It was easily five hundred metres from me to the entrance, first along the industrial cargoland that is Bracks Street and then down the spit of Irene Street, and then another five hundred metres back to the southern fence where the car is inside. It is a sizeable yard. Jo, with George and Peter in her rugged Toyota SUV, pick me up about halfway along Bracks Street and she guns the vehicle round into Irene and through an entrance at the end of the street next to the Perth-Fremantle railway line, the second of two entrances separated by a row of trees and low scrub serving to divide truck traffic in from out.

About two-hundred-and-fifty metres in is a complex of portable offices, with a few cars parked nearby and what appears to be a weigh bridge and control station at the rear. Stacks of containers line the yard along the railway line perimeter, another stacked row extends from near the office buildings. A lift

truck is working, shifting a load to a truck dolly. Jo pulls up in front of the office.

Both Peter and George disembark and are met on the verandah by a rotund and balding, weaselly faced man who, by virtue of his mannerisms, I take to be the manager of the yard. Peter shows the man his warrant card, and points to where we want to go. The man pulls a phone from his pocket and goes to make a call, but George takes the phone from him and indicates the man should join us in the SUV. There was no introduction.

We pull up by the aged red and white containers in front of Boulter's car. George checks the car while we head for the nearest container, the red one. The yard manager claims not to have keys for the locks. George appears from behind our SUV with a set of hydraulic bolt cutters and makes short work of the lock. The inside is stacked with what appear to be mostly washing machines and refrigerators with Chinese origins on the packaging. George repeats his trick with the lock on the rusty white container next to the fence, which turns out to be about half full of agricultural machinery. Clearly thinking that containers no longer fit for transport stacked with newly packed goods is suspicious, Peter stays with the first container to have a closer look. The rest of us move onto the ones on the other side of Boulter's car.

I lead the way to the container nearest the fence, noticing immediately the door is not closed. I swing it back and peer into the gloom. As the scene before me registers, my breathing freezes and my heart palpitates. Slumped in a chair along one side is the form of Kelly Boulter, a dark pool spreading on the floor beneath her. Deeper into the container, the shape of another form lies on the floor.

Before Jo could stop me I am at Boulter's side, fouling what is obviously

a crime scene, but desperate to find signs of life.

'There's a pulse,' I hear myself call in a pitiful, helpless voice. 'Faint, but there.' And I place my cheek in front of her nose, hoping for the sensation of breath.

Jo is at my side, pulling me back, conscious of the conflicting needs to preserve life, however shortlived it may be, and to secure a scene of crime. I hear George calling to Peter, and in the next breath asking for an ambulance. Within seconds Jo is on the phone, urgently requesting scene of crime officers and forensics field officers. She catches a look from Peter and relays a message that a police officer has been seriously wounded, another man is dead and the site may contain contraband.

George has marshalled all personnel on site in the lunch room. Peter is at the gate barring entry and egress to all except police and emergency. Jo talks softly on the phone to someone in the command chain while I wait in a state of suspended disbelief, numb, angry, despondent, pacing, crying, blaming myself for every evil visited upon humanity on this earth for all time. It's not fair, of course, it can't be fair, but someone has to shoulder the blame and right at this moment, the only person I can find is me. So I will have to do.

An ambulance pulls up, two paramedics climb down, pulling a stretcher out of the rear of the vehicle which they park at the entrance to the container. Jo guides them through the section of the crime scene I have already fouled, suggesting they try to stay within the same space. They are carrying tool boxes and begin their ministrations in quiet, cool earnest. It takes them only a few minutes and they zip off, siren dyoo-dyooing as it dopplers down the yard and

then a few moments later as it loops back along Tydeman. I still hear it as it crosses Stirling Bridge all the way to High Street in a mad dash for the Fremantle emergency ward.

In an attempt to distract the numbness in my head, I busy myself helping Jo string Police tape around the site. I hardly notice the arrival of a SOCO team and a pair of FFOs: even though I watch them don the vinyl coveralls, gloves, boot covers, hair nets and face masks, it barely registers. My mind is still regurgitating the horror I saw, and the dreadful sense of the impending loss of someone I actually care about.

In the distance, I see a black four-wheel drive, Lexus or BMW or some such, pull up in front of the office buildings. The driver gets out and opens the rear door. The lanky, silver haired figure of Enzo Gordioni striding for the front door is unmistakable. Nor the bulky bodyguard by his side, although I can't distinguish his nose at this range. A moment of revulsion drives the bile in my stomach upward as my phone rings.

'Hello?'

'Lazaar, are you okay?' It's Nick Fairgough.

'Yeah, sorry Nick, something caught in my throat.'

'Listen, I've had a call from my minister, seems Enzo Gordioni's a bit upset about my people closing his freight yard. That where you are?'

'I'm at the crime scene. An ambulance has just left with Boulter — she's alive, but that's all I know. Was stabbed through the thigh and suffered a nasty cut below her rib cage … lost a lot of blood. I think it's touch and go. I can see Gordioni has just arrived at the office — about two-hundred and fifty metres away. Jo's instructed George to detain him there and wait for Novice to arrive.

There's another body here, but I don't know anything about that yet — SOCOs and FFOs are in there at the moment. I can't leave just yet because I fucked up the crime scene, so I have to be eliminated … Jesus! That didn't come out right, did it?'

'Okay Art, sit somewhere and take it easy. Chances are you're in shock. I need to go and talk to the minister.'

'Nick.'

'Yeah?'

'Something here … a bit of a worry … there are two shipping containers here, both rust buckets that haven't seen an ocean for yonks, chock-a-block full of apparently new appliances and agricultural equipment. Peter had a quick deco and found more than a fistful of MDMA. And the container I found Kelly in …'

'Yeah?'

'I'm certain that's where I was waterboarded.'

33

Friday 6 September — 1 day before the election

My recollection of events following the discovery of Boulter and, as it turns out, the body of Joseph Swaddick are no more than a blur. There is a call from Donna Gardner at some point, I dismiss it. This morning, I see a text message from her informing me of her rescheduled meeting with Lipschitz at eleven-thirty. I also recall wandering the streets late into the night and bumping into a gang of street kids. They took me under their care, and I have no idea what pain-numbing medications I must have taken. Spider was especially concerned about Boulter, that I remember. But no more.

I burst into Lipschitz's office at eleven-thirty-five. From outside, I watch Gardner enter a minute or two earlier. My entrance catches the great man completely by surprise, I see it on his face. Gardner sits aghast, most likely because of the state of my appearance.

'Thank you, Donna,' I say, indicating the door in the manner of a trial lawyer making a public gallery point to a jury.

She's gone and Lipschitz has made a remarkable recovery. 'What are you doing, Lazaar?' He reaches for his desk phone, I assume to call security.

'It's all right, Vice Chancellor, I've signed in, the front desk knows I'm here with you' — the phone goes down — 'we have things to talk about so I'm taking Donna's meeting. And,' I am feeling the need to push on, 'I have no doubt that you will want to hear what I have to say, and that you will not want any other audience.' Point made, I pause for breath, pull a chair round so that we face off across the desk. I point to a set of polished and spotless golf clubs sitting in the corner of his office.

'How's your golf?'

'I'm just learning.' A glossy 10x8 appears in my hand and I place it in front

of Lipschitz and wait while he studies the image. He looks up, the hands of a supplicant. 'What is this, Lazaar?'

'You learning, I imagine. I'm just not sure what the lessons were, or from whom they came.' I wait, but not too long, just long enough for him to draw a breath and ready his retort. I jump in. 'Actually, this is you instructing Elise Jarman to withdraw the ridiculous charges she's cooked up against me. This is you admitting to her that you made a mistake. This is you preparing yourself for the shitstorm that's about to rain down on you. This is you getting the chance to exit gracefully and step down before that choice is taken from you.'

He laughs. A bold, contemptuous laugh that accompanies flinging the photograph back at me. 'You're out of your mind,' he says. And I think he means it.

'Perhaps,' I say. 'And perhaps with good reason. In the past week, I've been beaten nearly half to death, with some not so small thanks to you, I might add—'

'No, no, no, Lazaar'— a refuting finger goes up — 'I had nothing to do with that.'

'Nothing? You invited me to a lunch at which you had no intention of showing up, and without telling me I would be in the company of a sociopath of the highest rank. Your driver took me there. Your mate, this mate'— finger jabbing at the figure of Lamord in the photograph — 'calls in a car to bring me back here, only I get abducted, waterboarded, beaten and then thrown out in the street presumably with the intent that I might die of exposure.' I hold up a hand to indicate he should say nothing.

'What's more,' my tone now approaching fever pitch, 'my very good

friend, Detective Kelly Boulter, is now in intensive care with knife wounds, massive blood loss, and less than fifty percent chance of survival.'

'I don't see how this connects to your fraudulent and offensive behaviour toward a student.'

'There was no fraud, there was no sexual harassment, and you know it. Elise Jarman fabricated that at your behest, and you asked her to do it at your mate's behest … this mate.' Again my finger jabs the photograph.

And once again, in reply, the contemptuous laugh. 'I think it's time for you to leave, Lazaar.'

'In a moment, Vice Chancellor. But before I do, tell me who all of these people are in this picture with you.'

'I don't know all of them.'

'Really, I'm surprised. First your mate, Roger Lamord. He threatened me, you know. Seemed to think I know someone who has something that he said a friend wanted returned. Which friend do you imagine that might be, Wally? He's the only one I've ever heard call you that, you know. Which friend?'

'Well it's not me.'

'Okay, what about this guy?' I point.

Lipschitz laughs. 'That's the Prime Minister of Malaysia.'

'Ah, so you do know him. Have you wondered where the money might be coming from for this flash university he wants to build with you and Roger there? I bet he's shown an interest in your film studio plans too, I've heard he likes the movie business.'

'We have discussed possible opportunities, both in Malaysia and for Malaysian students here.'

'Okay, not him then. What about this guy?' I point to Sean Dower. Then I go on, before Lipschitz can answer. 'No, he's dead. Did you hear? You knew him of course, Sean Dower. Managing Director of SECSUR — a stupid name for a security business which belongs to Lamord — only, you see, I'm pretty sure he crossed the line so he had to go. He was there, you know, when I was being waterboarded, I heard his voice. But he's dead now, plane crash Tuesday morning, so we don't need to worry about him.' I point to the Asian man standing next to Dower in the picture. 'What about him? He's the one isn't he? I'll bet he's the "friend".'

'I don't know him.'

'But you played golf with him. Looks like you were partnered with him in this. I bet he wasn't just learning, eh? Oh no, he's a player, isn't he? You know him, what's his name?'

'He was here with the Malaysian PM. He's a diplomat. Tuah Johari, I think.'

'Yep. That's him. He's the "friend", but he's gone now, did you know? Scuttled back to KL Wednesday afternoon. He doesn't only have the one name here, did you know that?'

'Can't say I did.'

'I bet you did, Wally. You see, I think you met with him on several occasions, possibly at one or two of Lamord's soirees out at that fancy mansion on West Swan Road. He brought girls, didn't he? Asian girls, Middle Eastern Girls? His other name, Wally?' No answer. 'Yusuf, Wally; Yusuf Ababbas.'

'Look, Lazaar, this is all very interesting, but I've got a lot to do. I need to get on.'

'Indeed you do, Vice Chancellor. In particular you need to call Elise Jarman and deal with these bullshit charges against me. But in just a minute, okay, because before I leave, you need to understand just how all of this affects you, right?'

'Okay, but make it quick.'

'See these two guys at the back here? What about them, do you know them?'

'They're just security guys, I think. Dower provides services to visiting dignitaries.'

'You are so right. They're both dead now. Did you know?' At that moment, there seems to be a definite fading of Lippers' normal ruddiness. Perhaps he was doing a little mental maths. 'This one died a few weeks ago in an explosion at Parry Street in Fremantle. Both of these'— I point at Dower and Swaddick — 'were there that night. That's been verified, witnesses, you see. A homeless man was there too, still missing, possibly buried under the rubble. This one,' — I point at Swaddick — 'he was shot dead Wednesday night, found in the same place as Kelly Boulter. It's not been established just yet who shot him or the weapon used.' A little pause, just to make sure that what I'm saying is finding its mark. 'It's possible Sergeant Boulter shot him in defence of her own life, after she'd been stabbed twice. But the pathologists have to confirm that.

'Just thinking back over this, and the diminishing remains of this picture, it does seem possible that your mate, your very good mate, is cleaning house. Why do you imagine he would be doing that?'

Lipschitz chooses not to answer, but turns his gaze to look out the window over the car park. I continue my onslaught, pitching in a degree of poetic

licence to see if it makes the turn.

'I have a witness, and a sworn statement from that witness, who can place everyone in this image with the sole exception of the Malaysian Prime Minister at more than one gathering in a large mansion belonging to your mate. And there will be more witnesses, once the girls who were there are found. They can prove that your friend Yusuf is a human trafficker and slaver. He took young girls to these gatherings. This witness can connect you to these people and these events. These men' — again pointing at the two men at the back — 'committed murder. Kelly Boulter was about to arrest this one for it' — finger on Swaddick — 'but he has, as I said, met his end, and she has been seriously wounded attempting to bring him to justice. It seems to me you have a decision to make Vice Chancellor because I can swear to you I will not stop until the person ultimately responsible for the assault on me, on Kelly Boulter, for the murder of an innocent asylum seeker, is brought down. I also know that Roger Lamord — and I know this because he told me himself — will not stop until he has what he wants. The way I see it, there are only two people left in this photograph, and you're one of them.'

I take a marker from the desk and draw crosses through all except Lamord and Lipschitz, stand and place the photograph back in front of him, and say, more of a suggestion, really: 'A bit of a worry, don't you think, about who your friends are and how you choose them?' And turn on my heel and leave the room.

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The kitchens at Balsamic & Olives are a combination of technological marvel and interior design brilliance that occupy the floor below the restaurant's first-floor dining room. There are two large kitchens separated by a wall housing the ventilation and hydraulic systems and terminating at a long serving counter shared by both. Each with islands of gleaming stainless steel cooking stations and prep centres running the length. A bank of coolrooms with discrete climate controls lines the far end. Separate cleaning stations and crockery stores are located in alcoves along opposite walls, and a passage that runs behind the coolrooms provides staff access to the car park at one end and the refuse management area at the other. A number of small dining rooms and lounges, specifically to accommodate staff and drivers while their employers are dining in the restaurant upstairs, are on the opposite side of the passage. Both kitchens are designed to ensure produce fitting to a chef's art can be discrete, while simultaneously affording optimum efficiency in preparation, and clear separation between the culinary and the servir d'art.

Master chef Mashimoto and his team had chosen kitchen two, partly because the bench height had been set 100mm lower than kitchen one, affording him, on account of his short stature, better control over his knives, and partly because the management of the waste product from his preparations requires meticulous care, and kitchen two is closer to the refuse area. He did not want to be responsible for death as a consequence of mishandling, such incompetence would not be acceptable, and death can come from what is discarded much more easily than from the edible.

Mashimoto had been brought in from Kyoto to prepare two celebration banquets, the first tonight and the second tomorrow. He had begun work early

in the day. His number one assistant unpacked his knives, honed them to a razor edge, and replaced the stone in its safe box. This role is trusted only to Number One assistant. Number Two assistant inspected the liver, intestine and ovaries as they were extracted to ensure no traces were left behind. He sealed them in a plastic drum marked with hazard labels and placed them in the hazardous section of the waste disposal area. Mashimoto worked with great care, nothing left unattended, nothing left to chance, for a reputation is built on the finer aspects of the craft. And his reputation was the highest in the world.

It is customary at Balsamic & Olives for the doorway from the car park to the kitchens to be manned by a liveried doorman. The refuse area is secured by locked gates to which only the trucks and maintenance staff have keys. As Angelo Tassione entered, the doorman, an older man with a warm, welcoming smile and a sense of purpose, greeted him.

'Good evening sir. I trust Mister Gordioni is well and looking forward to his evening.' He then gestured to the big Italian. 'If you will follow me, sir. Mister Gordioni requested a private room for you. Just down the end here, sir.' Of course, no such request was made, but the Italian with the big nose could not know that. He would assume that such a request is made to protect his privacy, and the safety of his master. He would not question it.

The man with the big nose responded with a smile. The doorman, in a limp that favoured his left leg but seemed in no way to impair his progress, led him to a small lounge at the end of the corridor on the left, handed him a menu and a refreshing citrus juice and closed the door, leaving him watching a large screen CCTV which displayed notable guests arriving and settling for the

occasion about to begin in the opulent privacy of the second floor dining room. The staff of VIP guests cannot be served alcohol, but their meal is complimentary and twenty minutes later, the doorman reappeared with Angelo Tassione's meal. He closed the door as he left and went out to the refuse area and used a key to unlock the gate to the access lane and left, locking the gate behind him.

Meanwhile, as Chef Mashimoto was putting his final touches to the fugu sashimi in kitchen two, Enzo Gordioni's 85th birthday was getting underway on the second floor. It was a gathering to behold: money and influence rubbing shoulders with diamonds of opulence and pearls of wisdom, each guest personally welcomed by Roger Lamord, the affable host to his good friend's celebration. For Lamord, it was the rehearsal for the greater celebration to follow the next evening. Some of those here tonight would be back again tomorrow, joined by others, by the luminaries of industry and power. And Mashimoto would work his magic again.

At precisely 9 p.m. a contingent of officers from Australian Customs descended on Balsamic & Olives and took Enzo Gordioni, several members of his family, and certain associates into custody on charges relating to the importation of drugs. Diners and guests sat dumbfounded, chopsticks with selections of fugu sliced by the world's greatest chef of his art were poised halfway between plates and mouths as audible gasps and murmurs swept the room. Roger Lamord, with the support of political figures and notable lawyers also present, remonstrated with the officer in charge, only to be shown a warrant for arrests and asked to remain in their seats. Mobile phones appeared in hands all around the room, some recording the events as they unfolded, others making calls to discuss them

with persons unseen. It was all a bit chaotic and guests were visibly unsure about precisely how they should behave. After all, a good many of them considered themselves to be above the laws that affected the common man.

The events played out in living colour on the CCTV in the small dining room at the end of the corridor behind the kitchens, and Angelo Tassione would have seen it all were he not nose down in a pool of his own vomit. While death from fugu poisoning is slow and agonising, vomiting is a prompt second stage, quickly followed by paralysis. Angelo Tassione did not die for some time, but paralysis meant he was unable to raise the alarm. And the events unfolding on the second floor ensured he was not missed, nor sought after.

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Saturday 7 September — Election day

Out of the slung mud of election campaigning; out of swarms of fake news and even faker images; out of the loosely packed mistruths of mainstream journalism, shock-jock solecisms and social-media rants by influencers vested in the coal and dirt-shifting industries that drive the intense lobby groups of conservative capitalists emerged a new chapter that would, in future time, be recognised as one of the bleakest in Australia's lived future.

'I can tell you Australia has a new government,' declares TAPM-elect at around 7:30 p.m., further adding that the party now relegated to the opposition had scored its lowest ever primary vote in a hundred years. It was a sweet victory. In the days that follow, the news is awash with a Government getting straight down to the business of removing taxes on carbon, delivering welfare cuts to force welchers back into the job market, and forming the new pseudo-military Australian Border Force that would turn the boats back, stop the illegal invasion of asylum seekers, and define the new Australia. It was to the ranks of the latter that Max Glendinning was catapulted as Deputy Director Operations: a debt paid, and the removal of one last security risk to Roger Lamord. With Noah Carter tapped for a cabinet post, and Codlin at TAPM's side as Chief of Staff, 'the fiercest political warrior he has ever known', Lamord had a successful campaign behind him and a clean slate ahead.

The charges against Enzo Gordioni grew in sizable chunks over the weeks that followed, ensnaring a broadening network of family and associates in a spread of drugs, money laundering, and intimidation offences. The release of documents and papers previously held under escrow by a team of lawyers prepared by Calvin Bishop and an unidentified associate reporting content sourced from confidential informants over a number of years contributed to an

expansion of the investigation beyond Australian Customs to include the Serious Crimes Divisions of Fraud, Vice and Drugs and the Australian Taxation Office. The irony of his removal from the chambers of power, which symbolised much of his life, to a much smaller chamber at Grevillia, a private prison operated by Lamord's SANCO group of companies, was, according to some in the know, not lost on Enzo. In time, assets thought to have been purchased or partly funded by his illegal activities would be seized and sold under the Proceeds of Crimes Act, slotting a reasonable return to the taxpayer.

The coroner declared the demise of Gordioni's bodyguard, Angelo Tassione, to be death by misadventure, finding no explicable reason why a man who ate a gourmet burger and chips prepared in Balsamic & Olive's kitchen as his last meal came to have a minute trace of tetrodotoxin in his system, which under any logical explanation could only have come from the preparation of fugu sashimi. Yet, as Mashimoto would testify, all precautions had been taken and to his knowledge only he and assistant Number Two handled the material, and did so in the prescribed manner. The unfortunate events did not tarnish his reputation in any way.

The knife found near Detective Sergeant Kelly Boulter was a military issued Italian-made tactical combat knife with a 184mm stainless cobalt steel blade, one of a variety of instruments favoured by certain members of the SASR as a close combat weapon. Its edge had been honed with great precision to a razor angle. The forensics examination concluded that the knife belonged to Joseph Swaddick, a conclusion drawn from the scabbard found on Swaddick's belt, DNA traces of his saliva mixed with machine oil on the blade, and his fingerprints on the hasp. Boulter's stab wounds, a deep penetrating wound in the upper thigh and a

severe slice to her left side fortunately deflected by a Kevlar vest, were both found to be made by the knife. The forensic pathologists matched the cutting profile on Boulter's wounds to the wound that sliced Ishmail Salim's throat, drawing the further conclusion that Joseph Swaddick had to be responsible for that murder. This conclusion was further supported by dog hairs found on Salim's clothes being matched to those found in Swaddick's vehicle. In light of that evidence, the case was closed and Mahmoud Khalil freed. Of Swaddick's death, little could be firmly determined other than the fact it was Boulter's service Glock that delivered the fatal shot. Boulter herself, when she could finally be questioned on the matter, had no recollection of pulling the trigger. Her fingerprints were the only ones found on the weapon, but its location on the floor between the two bodies could not rule out the presence of a third party.

No question mark whatsoever hung over Detective Kelly Boulter's actions in the death of Joseph Swaddick. She was, however, reprimanded for acting alone contrary to service protocols, which was cause for a further deferment of promotion. When the doctors eventually proclaimed she was fit for duty, she did not return to Midland, but was given a posting to the Police Academy in Joondalup to teach a course in forensics awareness and scene of crime management to service recruits. Superintendent McPherson gave testimony at her hearing to the effect that the detective was wanting in her capacity to act as a member of a team and described her as an 'opportunist who had a tendency to pursue theories instead of following the evidence to hand'. He blamed a culture of outsourcing aspects of vital investigations to undisciplined amateurs and suggested a full review of how investigations are handled should be undertaken. His retirement by the end of that month drew no attention at all.

On his release, Mahmoud Khalil led police and immigration officials to two compounds where asylum seekers who had been granted bridging visas under the previous government were housed. The man Mahmoud knew as Yusuf, who took care of the refugees, was nowhere to be found. It unfolded to authorities that Yusuf had arranged work for them, any wages for which were annexed to cover their care and housing, but no records of such payments were found. When authorities arrived, the residents were malnourished and had received no care for several days, none could produce any identity documents or copies of their bridging visas releasing them into community detention. Even more troubling to the authorities, was that no record of these visas, nor of these two addresses supposedly registered for community detention, nor the names Yusuf (other names unknown) or Mister Singh, appeared anywhere in the system. Under the new government, the bridging visas were to be cancelled and the refugees transferred to asylum seeker facilities for processing. The local press made a gourmet banquet of the very idea of slavery being present in wholesome Perth in this day and age, extending the outrage to the incompetencies of previous governments in dealing with asylum seekers, even to the extent of encouraging slavery.

Falullah Salim returned to study in her newly assumed identity, which under instructions from senior police management, was conferred under the terms of a witness protection order. In a private ceremony, she was able to bury her brother and spent her grief surrounded by the only three people who knew the truth. Universities across the nation were in turmoil with new funding cuts imminent while a performance based model was worked out, and this had a follow-on effect at a local level resulting in reduced course numbers and added

academic duties. Both Vice Chancellor Lipschitz and Deputy Provost Jarman were stood down from their respective university positions with an impending internal enquiry into supposed abuses of power, which would ultimately be returned to the Crime and Corruption Commission to pursue, or not, any charges that might arise. Public opinion swung wildly into opposite extremes as to whether any of this mattered at all.

With Enzo Gordioni in custody and his reign of control over most things Fremantle at an end, and the release of years of hard work in secret by committed journalist Calvin Bishop, Hunter was free to return to his life before exile. But he chose, instead, to remain on the streets, in his street identity. He never discussed the reasons behind this decision, although speculation by those few people who cared assumed that after ten years, he believed he had become a different person. One summer Tuesday, later that year, Lavender Jensen and Falullah Salim sought him out at his favourite spot opposite the post office. With them was a third young woman, about the same age. With tears in his eyes, Hunter led them to a lock up in the old wool stores building, where he opened a safe locker and removed nine birthday gifts.

'I just called to offer my congratulations.' My voice is thick and my words slur as I hold the phone a couple of centimetres from my ear for fear that the voice of Roger Lamord on the other end will attach itself to my inner brain and inject me with some poison unique to his kind.

'It's very kind of you to call, Lazaar. Thank you.' He is jubilant, I can hear his joy plain as day, even though it is close to midnight. 'It is certainly a good win.'

A good win? My addled brain struggles to make sense of his words. What the fuck constitutes a good win in this day and age? My brain says it was a devastating loss; a win was nowhere to be found, says I. It is simply a compounded loss, like the GFC melting down the money, one brick falling after another. This was no single loss I'm feeling as it takes my heart with it, and its poison violates every part of my being.

The writing on the wall for Labor was clear to me by lunch time and my slide into a bottomless quiet despair was the kind only a malted whisky had any chance of halting. I'm more than halfway down and it hasn't done its trick so far, so I push on toward the bottom, trying to fathom the depths to which my stomach has retched.

I came home the previous evening to a house that was dreadfully lonely. The image that remains with me on entering is littered remnants of abandonment: a home unloved and unlived-in. Where my mother's house had a plaque that read, 'Shelter here all who step across this threshold', my plaque, at least in my mind's eye, carried Dante's words: 'Abandon hope all ye who enter'. Indeed, it seemed a prerequisite. When I cast my eye round, I'm faced with the scattered remains of some fruitless search by persons unknown for the secrets I am guarding. But it was not in me to return the house to order. In the circumstances, it seems necessary that it remain as it is, a sign of how my life appears to me in that moment, wherever along the temporal horizon that moment occurs.

My thoughts shout at me in random sketches. At some dark hour I must have figured that direct congress with the enemy is all that is left.

'I hear not everything has been a winner for you,' my voice submits a limp attempt to get under his skin, or, perhaps, offset the stain of my own losses.

He laughs. 'Oh, quite the contrary, it's precisely what this country needs.'

'I didn't call to discuss politics, Roger. Your side won. It's over. I just want to know how you got away with it.'

'Yeah … not sure I'm following you there, Art. I'm rich, I get away with a lot — getting away with it is the main thrill. Is there something in particular?'

'In particular? Yes there is something in particular: three murders, perhaps more, people smuggling, modern day slavery, assault, political interference, bribing cops, falsifying records … the list goes on. All of it points to you, but nothing …'

'Of course there's nothing. I've committed no crime, there is not one shred of evidence that I have done any of the things you describe, Lazaar. If others commit crimes and want to use the results of those crimes to gain advantage, that's their concern. I buy when the market is selling, and sell when it's buying. That's what winning is, Lazaar — an art you have probably not practised much. There's a Malay saying, maybe you've heard it, *jangan makan dunia* — there's no need to eat the world. Winning means getting fifty-one percent when the other side gets forty-nine.'

'But you have suffered losses. Dower, a multi-million dollar plane, Yusuf, Sam Codlin, looks like your mate Glendinning might be leaving. Gordioni's arrest can't have done your restaurant's reputation much good, not to mention a body found in a back room that looks like food poisoning …'

'Incidental failures are part of all success, some are tragic. Our insurers have actuaries that calculate the worth of valued employees, good people move on to better positions all the time, it's the way the world works.'

'How is snatching victory from the leaky boats of refugees a win, Roger?'

'You don't get it, do you, Lazaar? If people are silly enough to get on a boat and think they will find a new life here in Australia, they've got fucking rocks in their heads. We can't afford to take in every fucking bleeding heart that's a victim. At least now we've got a government prepared to send them back. We say who comes here Lazaar, us, the Australian people.'

My drunken mind struggles to find purchase on any of a number of thoughts. I'm too tired to be angry, too beaten to be of any use. But one more question remains.

'What about the girl, Roger? That must have been quite a loss for you to go to such lengths?'

'The girl is no loss, Lazaar, she's a symbol of why Australia won a great victory for freedom today.' He pauses, as though thinking, and then says, 'In this game just to win is not enough, your enemies must be seen to lose. That's a cold hard truth about reality. The losers determine the winners. You lost. That's the truth.'

I sit in the silence of a severed connection and top up my glass while I think on the matter of truth and freedom. What are these ill-defined concepts to me? Does truth drift like water, shapeless, bounded by its container, always seeking the lowest point, forever pursuing the greater body lest it evaporate. I stare at my glass of whisky and it dawns on me that water, like the whisky in my glass, is unfree. Like all of humanity. But what is freedom? I utter the only words left to me: 'A bit of a bloody worry.'

The Art Lazaar Interviews

Art Lazaar

Art Lazaar is a fictional character who has been given a poetic licence described as a "duly notarised certificate long lost to the bottom drawer of his desk which lends him charter to delve into great mysteries" ("A Murder of Darlings" 61). In *Poetic Licence*, he is employed as a creative writing teacher at Murdoch University, but becomes embroiled in a mystery of murder and the moral dimensions of the politics of asylum seeking and people smuggling. Theoretically, he is seeking to explain the role of story and its transformational experience in writing political thrillers. When he finally discovers the truth, he may not like it.

The interview that follows is divided into four days, with each day following a theme based on Phillips and Huntley's concept of the four character dimensions (*Dramatica* 51). A brief introduction discusses the theme and the research questions which are investigated. It is arranged this way because I view the exegesis as a 'living document', it exhibits physical, sociological, and psychological attributes. There is a natural tendency for us to think in themes and the exegesis is intentionally thematic; that is, it exhibits an "emergence of meaningful patterned behaviour" and I act in a self-reflective and coherent way as its author, engaging Art Lazaar as its spokesperson (Alexander 28). From my perspective, it is a demonstration of the creative thesis as an emergent whole because both the novel and the exegesis exist within coincidences of nearness and similarity that give the outcome its meaning.

The style of questioning used in the interviews is drawn from the styles used in *The Paris Review,* in which the interviewer is given no identity and referred to only as "Interviewer". *Paris Review* interviews seek the wisdom of writers about their craft and, as John Lahr suggests in his introduction to *Playwrights at Work*, while the interviewees "talk

about the physical circumstances of their playwriting, about the history of their plays and their influences, about their lives, none of them can quite answer the question every interviewer wants to know: how does the play happen?" (xii). Much the same can be said of Art Lazaar in his interviews here, and while the interviewer is often trying to explicate his relationship with the novel and 'his author' and how the story happened, the tone appears somewhat sycophantic and is designed to draw the subject out in academic terms rather than interrogate the basis of Art Lazaar's knowledge.

This is a deliberate attempt at irony; that here we have a character speaking on behalf of his author in an attempt to explain why he exists in the role he has instead of having an author speak on behalf of his characters. Art Lazaar is not Kevin Price, and Kevin Price is not Art Lazaar, even though, in the context of these interviews, it may seem as though they oftentimes speak with similar, if not the same, voice.

The Interviewer is simply known as T.I., while Art Lazaar is A.L.

Day One | Motivation

The following draws on a range of understandings around motivation to illustrate what could stimulate a discussion on how story might begin its reign of influence, ranging from the characters involved in the novel to the author's drive to make a point.

Characters, Authors and Readers

T.I.: My understanding is that an exegesis is an explanation of a text. What motivates this discussion to explain *Poetic Licence* in pursuit of the knowledge it explores, especially in how writing such a novel can have any impact on teaching creative writing?

A.L. I think we need to begin with words because words make writing, and writing makes knowledge and we are interested here in what it is that drives this complex relationship between the text of the novel and the text of the exegesis. You know where the word 'motivation' comes from, right? It's French. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) tells us that 'motivation' appeared in English around 1390, meaning 'will' or 'drive' from Anglo Norman; and 'reason for action' (especially pertaining to legal action) from Middle French. It was probably after the German 'Motivierung', in the 1870s, that motivation was applied to psychology, describing the "stimulus for action towards a desired goal, especially as resulting from psychological or social factors" ("motivation, n.").

The key word here is 'stimulus', the cause that prompts movement. It is worth noting that there is a slightly longer history in English Literature and Criticism to express the cause-and-effect relationship commonly based on the causes of a character's actions and attributed to a work's plot. In educational theory and creativity theory, motivation is divided into two distinct types: intrinsic, that impetus driven by a personal interest in a subject, topic or task; and extrinsic, that drive from external factors such as reward or penalty (Amabile "Motivation and Creativity"; Duchense et al. ch. 7). Amabile's research into creativity found

that intrinsic motivation produces more creative output, and extrinsic motivation is detrimental to it ("The Social Psychology of Creativity" 581). This suggests to me that a creative writer's motivation is intrinsic: their purpose might be to sell a million books, but they are driven by the story they want to tell, not the books they want to sell.

And, of course, there remains a question as to whether a person's motivation can be known at all. Take this comment from a character in *The Girl In The Spider's Web:* "If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's just how difficult it can be to understand a person's motivation" (Lagercrantz 197). In a discussion at Murdoch University in 2013, China Miéville discourages creative writing students to engage in attempting to explore character motivation, saying, "Not only is it not necessary to know your characters' motivations, it's impossible" (Payne).

T.I.: And you agree with that?

A.L.: Actually, I think it's a bit of a worry. I agree with Phillips and Huntley, who argue in *Dramatica* that motivation is one of four critical dimensions of character, which they divide equally between actions and decisions (Phillips and Huntley 42-43). There is an attribute in a character's make up that stimulates an action or a decision; and being able to discuss it is integral to understanding how events play out. If we think of this exegesis as a character, its body of knowledge stimulates a desire to pursue (and encourage readers to consider) an understanding of how story functions in the creative acts of making *Poetic Licence*. To this end, in disagreement with Miéville, this exegesis argues that its motivation *can* be understood, and through understanding that motivation, its character as a document will be accessible – it can be thought of as an upstanding character, a knowledgeable character, an integrative character … because it seeks to explore knowledge, expand on it and contribute to the field of creative writing. Those teaching creative writing can find ways

within the novel and this discussion to further their an understanding of story – what it is and what it does – and how they can draw on that understanding to benefit the student of creative writing.

T.I.: You say the motivation is the ‘stimulus to action’. What was the stimulus for this research, conscious or unconscious, for action towards an inquiry into the role of story and its transformative effect?

A.L.: It’s a question of how writing a novel explores what Andrew Melrose highlights in *Write for Children*: that the act of writing is to concoct a “critical representation of experience” (9) in which the experience that the author wants to explore, and share through the circumstances and circuitry of the characters involved (McCormack loc. 506; kindle ed.), is a representation of happenings, real or fictional, that are being examined. The writer’s job is to make real what is fiction and to fictionalise the real so that the reader is transported into a plausible world of the story (Melrose, "Reading and Righting" 110). Moreover, it is the writer’s job to embody human conditions in a character and subject them to the tests of conflict through a series of events, and thereby examine the transformation of character or circumstance that results.

I’d argue that writing is the critical representation by which we, as society, come by the collective consciousness that records stories informing us of who we are and what has passed before our time (Booker 543-570; ch. 31); how humankind grows, not only as individuals, but also collectively. Those stories are the instruments that lead us to an understanding of what we call our culture. So, I imagine – and I can only imagine because I know him less well than he knows me – that my author’s desire to know more about the role of story in creative writing stems from a desire to know what drives us to set before our society this record; who determines its need?

But there is a dilemma at play for my author, who occupies three identities – writer, teacher, and scholar (see Appendices 1-3) – and that is to decide on behalf of which of these identities he is conducting this inquiry, because, surely the paradigms of knowledge within which each functions will cause the writer think of the questions differently to the teacher who will think of them differently to the scholar. The concept of dilemma is an important theme running through this inquiry, and I don't speak here of only my author's dilemma, of which version of him is speaking. There is also the dilemma confronting me at the outset of *Poetic Licence* of whether to engage with Hunter's pleadings or remain resistant, which is a crucial step-off point; and the dilemma that confronted Fallulah on that fateful evening she fled the transport bus on Marmion Street. There is even a dilemma over whether this approach to this exegesis serves its intention well: my author could have written it as a straightforward academic treatise, entirely in his own voice. It is the notion of dilemma that serves as the trigger point for the transformative effects that occur as learning, experience, or growth applicable to author, character, and reader – and, perhaps, scholar.

T.I: Surely your author is one person: where does this dilemma of which version of him is speaking come from?

A.L.: It is well known among us characters that my author has long held a keen focus on the making of story. In Appendix 1, he describes the awakening of this; in Appendix 2, he describes how his approach to teaching creative writing was based on it; in Appendix 3, he describes how he struggled in his early undergraduate creative writing courses with why there appeared to be no tutorial discussion on story and the pursuit of its making; yet, the assessment tasks by which learning was to be measured made it clear that knowledge of how we go about this 'making' is crucial. These are three different paradigms of thinking about the role of story and its transformative effect on his life.

In the last of these, it became apparent that the supporting theory in the study of creative writing was expected to come from English and Literature studies, but those theories are analytical and critical in nature, often extending what students learned in high school English and English Literature courses. Significant debate has raged around questions of the relevance of literary theory to creative writing for years (see for example Boulter; Dawson; Hecq; Melrose; Myers; Ramey; Ritter and Vanderslice; Royle; Swander et al.). As Peter Vandenberg says,

> While there is much of interest in discussions about the appropriateness of theory in and for creative writing, when such discussion reifies scholarly debate and dismisses it derisively as "theory," creative writing denes itself in opposition to critical inquiry. The effort that Ritter, Vanderslice, and their contributors take up here is predicated on the notion that creative writing teachers ought no longer to limit their interests, and by extension their students' attention, to the perception that what it means to be a writer is represented by an internal struggle with the formal characteristics of a literary category. (Vandenberg 107)

What this means, of course, is that a lot of people are trying to find the right balance between the practice and teaching of creative writing and literary theory that might impact its influence and how we understand it. In *Veering*, Nicholas Royle even poses the question: "How should we respond to … the perceived demise or end of 'theory' and rise of so-called 'creative writing'?" (67).

For my author, the dilemma arises because story is part of his identity across all three identities, but when it came to this particular inquiry, he was faced with a choice as to whether the inquiry was conducted, or predominantly conducted, by the writer, teacher or scholar. To some, these may seem convenient labels, and, in the end, the author is all of them in one, but, illogical or not, understanding of the practices and methods of engagement with

the academy are different for those who teach when compared to those who practice, or those who study the discipline.

And it needs to be noted, too, going back to Royle's comment, that theory is not dead. Yet I do worry whether the wrong question is being asked. We have arrived at a situation where, as Anthony Eaton points out in "Getting Out of the Box", using the tools of analysis in the teaching of creative writing, which occurs in a great many high school English classrooms and undergraduate programs, means we are not exploring theoretical underpinnings of what goes into the creating and making, but into the reception and response, and this is a wholly inadequate way to teach creative writing (45). When I say to Donna Gardiner, "we need to look at creativity differently" (PL 26 [50]) I am not only alluding to the need to embed theories of story into pedagogy as an important foundation for teaching creative writing, but also for thinking about and discussing the practice of *doing* creative writing as well as going deeper into our studies of creativity. And this, I argue, would give rise to greater study of the impact of story in the discipline.

T.I.: How would you describe the difference in motivation for action on your part as the central character in *Poetic Licence* to that of your author's to investigate this question?

A.L.: The psychological and sociological factors governing my life are different from those governing my author's, but it isn't unreasonable to draw a link between fictional characters and their author. While Sol Stein points out how writers creating fiction are working with characters who ultimately are their selves (*On Writing* para. 2; ch. 15), I do find it a bit of a worry that readers come along and make assumptions about authors based on the behaviour, or voices of their characters. The author's job is to create a world in which the characters and their actions appear credible under the circumstances the work is examining. So, any actions I take (and, of course, this goes for any of the other characters as well) must have plausible cause and be within my capacity to execute. For deeper examination on this,

my author would point you to Egri's chapter on Bone Structure (ch. 1). Me? I would just say I don't possess the physical characteristics to fly, so if I fly like Superman, it will be immediately recognised as implausible, but, on the other hand, I do have a poetic licence, and that gives me credible powers to alter some circumstances to suit my purpose, appearing, as Max Glendinning says, "like a ghost who walks a space between the law and the lawless" (PL 187 [211]).

Any motivation for action is usually based on some desire to get others to change (Campbell and Howard 9), so my will to question the motivations of Lipshitz (PL 355-360 [379-384]; ch. 33), for example, come from a belief that he has intent that somehow conflicts with mine, otherwise why would I bother? As the central character of the novel, my job is to prove the premise, in this case that "truth alone does not lead to freedom" (PL prelims 1 [25]). Of course, the political thriller hides many truths (as the title to this exegesis suggests) so, to do this, I must be motivated to exhaust all possibilities within the circumstances the novel is examining that truth *does* lead to freedom. Naturally, that is presaged in the idea that someone or something, whose motives are oppositional, blocks the path to that proof. So, I am motivated to 'pursue' the truth and 'encourage' others to agree that such a pursuit is worthwhile. On the other hand, Roger Lamord is motivated to 'thwart' my pursuit to protect his self-interest and he encourages others to 'reconsider' my appeals for the worthiness of my goal.

My author's role is not to impose beliefs upon me, but to unearth beliefs that give me cause to act, and one of the trickier parts to this is managing point of view so that faithfulness to my cause is not compromised. By this I mean that my actions must remain loyal to my beliefs, and any attempt by my author to question those actions outside of the world of the story would make me appear unreliable in my knowledge of the events I'm narrating. All of us are fallible to memory distortions, we all fabricate or use a selective choice to make our

version of events appear more attractive or real, but I would argue that this fallibility is part of the condition that makes us human.

T.I.: How can a character be human when they are a manifestation of a storyteller's imagination?

A.L.: Okay, character is *homo fictus,* who Forster describes as being "more elusive than his cousin", *homo sapiens* (*Aspects of the Novel* 55). Although born in the mind of an author, a character is born to represent human concepts. When a reader engages with a work, they are drawn into circumstances in which they are said to 'identify' with the character; that is, they have reached a point where the way a character responds to the situation in which they find themselves strikes a chord of familiarity, or the reader places the character's goals in line with their own. I accept Hunter's challenge to pursue Ishmail Salim's murder (PL 64-65 [88-89]), the reader comes along with me because that's what they would do – or at least under the spell of fiction, would do – in same circumstances. The details of the situation, the danger in which Fallulah is placed, are so vividly given by my author, that a reader can easily sympathise with the situation because they feel – at least imaginatively – that they are there too. The sympathy is a human condition, and how we characters manipulate our version of events is designed to get reader's sympathies, and that's what I mean when I say it is part of the condition that makes us human. Maybe I am a character in a novel, but I am sitting here talking to you, so how could you suggest that I am not representing human? More to the point, would you not suggest that imagination, however it might be wielded, is not uniquely human?

T.I.: Is this, we sitting here together, what we usually call characterisation?

A.L.: We could say our conversation is evidence of characterisation: it couldn't happen if we didn't exist. In studies of Literature, we come across this term 'characterisation'

quite early and often, and it's used to discuss the experience readers have of how characters in a work such as a novel or film or short story develop. So, readers, like you, come to understand the way the imagined character is portrayed by the author, most particularly through the point of view and voice the reader recognises. An author's skills for making the character knowable to the reader is 'characterisation'.

But the important aspect of the term is that it is the reader who claims this knowledge. This is made clear by the simple fact that the word 'character' has become '-ised'; that is, it has been modified to conform to "the way of" character (OED "-ize, suffix"), which, in most cases, is a model of some human performance, a condition that makes that character knowable in human terms. This means that for a 'character' to be 'characterised', the character must first exist – the derivation cannot exist without that from which it is derived. If characterisation is a metaphor that compares the artefact of what is described in the pages of a work with some human condition with which the reader can claim a degree of familiarity, we are left with a question of what we have before the character exists. For writers, this is a different worry to characterisation.

T.I.: If characters come out of imagination, what is it, then, that makes character?

A.L: Writers begin with an observation, one that usually involves some foible of humanity that must be explored, assimilated, corrected or completely eliminated through the course of the work (see McCormack, *The Editor, The Novel and The Novelist*, loc. 2189; kindle ed.). For example, my author observed a build-up of asylum-seeker boats on the water leading up to an election. He wanted to know if they could have been purposefully placed for political gain, and who might profit from that. So, his first job is to construct an artefact to represent the carrier of that foible and this artefact is what we know of as 'character'. That's me in *Poetic Licence*.

But for now, let me describe the two models I like to teach for creating characters from the ground up, and these apply even if the writer is working with a known personality, such as a long-deceased great aunt, or a recently born child. The first is Egri's tri-dimensional model in which the writer composes the character out of attributes taken from three known human categories: physicality, sociology and psychology (33-43; ch. 1). He goes on to provide a model of how these three classes of attributes are influenced by the circumstances surrounding the character's life (44-50; ch. 2), and how the natural growth occurs through a dialectical model of *thesis* against *antithesis* leading to *synthesis* (51-61; ch. 3) – in other words, pursuit and resistance leads to growth. I usually get my students to work up character identities that make use of these attributes in short biographical studies as a first step, regardless of what they are writing.

Let me give you an example: Say a character, who is especially proud of their beautiful long hair, yet careless in the management of that hair as they are working around machinery, suffers a terrible scalp injury, leaving them disfigured. The consequences of this impacts them psychologically; long term hospitalisation and rehabilitation changes their sociology, removes them from their family and community. But perhaps it reveals a silver lining which would otherwise have been hidden, and while they are initially bitter and resentful, they go on to find great meaningful purpose.

The other model comes from Phillips and Huntley and their proposition that four dimensions are needed to represent a character as human (63). Their model explores 'motivation' as a class of attribute that identifies the initial drive for actions or decisions towards some 'purpose', a class examining a potentially achievable desire. 'Methodology' (the way one goes about their business) and 'evaluation' (how one assesses their progress towards their goal) are the second and third classes in-between and, because of human uniqueness, illustrated by Egri's tri-dimensional model, everyone attends to these differently.

Now, let's say that our character with the long hair is motivated to ensure that such accidents never happen again and pursues a purpose of getting uniform occupational safety rules established; they study industry and join organised union movements, and measure their progress by visiting accident victims and recalcitrant industrialists – all directed towards that purpose. You can see that when we combine these two models, we have a potent method for creating characters who are modelled on human conditions. By beginning here, and as we realise the way characters function within the circumstances the writing submits us to, we naturally find a unique voice and a world of story that offers a unique point of view leading to 'characterisation'.

T.I.: In *Poetic Licence*, the world of story is managed through the point of view of an amalgam of four characters driving the narrative: you in the first person, and Hunter, Boulter and Lamord in the third person, each representing an archetypal role in the circuitry of characters. This seems complex. What lies behind the decision to write it this way?

A.L.: Well, just before I get to that answer, I have to say that I think my author's decision to do it this way put me at a considerable disadvantage, an issue I raised at an AAWP conference in 2018 (but no one took me seriously). Your point about an amalgam is interesting because you have to take into account that the author is in essence an 'implied' character, and here his voice is shifting between the characters, making use of all points of view to produce an objective perspective.

To answer your question, though, I think it was possibly an experiment in making use of subjective, main character, impact character, and objective throughlines (Phillips and Huntley 21), hoping to reduce a perceived main character bias towards the fallibility I spoke of earlier. I think there is possibly a tendency for a reader to draw a closer relationship between the author and a character written in the first person than one in the third person, but as is sometimes stated in the literature, the first-person narrator can be considered more

unreliable than a third-person narrator – some claim that *only* a first-person narrator can be unreliable (see, for example, Reedsy "What is an Unreliable Narrator?") – because they can be seen, through an impression of being given the privilege to tell the story, to be deceptive, bending the story in their own vision for their own reasons (Stern 162).

Of course, this is not what Wayne Booth is implying in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. His point is that narrators of all kinds can be unreliable, and that modern fiction saw authors experimenting with unreliability in narrators based on their capacity to change – or perhaps to set up deliberate illustrations of change – through the course of the fiction they narrate. The purpose of this is to carry the reader along with the voice they adopt as an "implied author" only for a later revelation showing they may have left certain truths lying by the wayside, and what is in question is not whether the narrative is in the first or third person, but the moral disposition of the character doing the narrating (158).

Booth's point, however, only refers to the effect on the reader and how they judge the character, he has no concern whatsoever with the effect it might have on the character and how morality can be affected by what one is permitted to know. The disadvantage I mentioned comes from the fact that I am denied an objective perspective. I do try to raise this concern with the reader by taking advantage of an incident to give my class an exercise to investigate "whether the character written in the first person is in any way at a disadvantage or not compared to the character written in the third person" (PL 248 [272]). All that aside, though, I would say that my relationship with my author is best described as one of 'high fidelity' – and that goes to the overall transformative effect of the work – even though I do change my mind and change my position on certain matters, and exercise my poetic licence accordingly, I am faithful to my beliefs. I'm not sure that makes me unreliable. But it does, at least, make me human.

T.I.: What does motivation contribute to our understanding of story?

A.L: I think motivation is a force of energy, whether it is a deeply held interest in something, or in the form of a reward or the avoidance of penalty. The writer needs this energy source, and story can be central to it. But it is important to differentiate between motivation and purpose. 'I want to be a writer', for example, is purpose, not motivation, although the desire might be motivated by 'being sick and tired of not having a voice'. Thus, the connection can be drawn teleologically, expressed as 'I became a writer, because I was sick and tired of not having a voice', which considers action, development, and existence that become purpose (Alexander 7), establishing a unity between motivation and purpose. We can do the same with my example from earlier and describe the character in teleological terms as one who 'establishes uniform occupational safety rules, because disfigurement ostracised them'.

One way you can think of story is as an experience of action, development, and existence in parallel to "complex dynamic integrations of objects, actors, and events" (Turner 10). The pursuit of story can motivate a writer because within that dynamic they can find something of deep personal interest (intrinsic) or see something for which readers will reward them (extrinsic). And this points to another source of energy for the writer that emerges in the act of writing, and that is through their characters. As I said above, we know (or at least suppose) that the characters in the story are not the author – I'm not my author, for example – but it must be true that characters are drawn from an author's understanding of the conditions that shape their lives. In an odd kind of way, writers make excuses for characters behaving in certain ways, and this is a dual form of motivation because it both energises the character, but it also energises the writer to pursue the possibilities that it throws up.

Beginning Before the Beginning

T.I.: James N. Frey was one of your author's early influences (see Appendix 1). How much do you think the advice to sample the "soup and salad before the entrée" *(Damn Good Novel* 75) influences his research and teaching?

A.L: Well, you know that comment refers to the point of attack for a story, right? But I can see how we might think about it in terms understanding why we write at all. In Appendix 3, my author discusses in detail his first undergraduate unit in creative writing, but I know that it started with formulating a response to the questions: "Why do I want to write? What am I most interested in writing about?" (School of Social Sciences and Humanities, "EGL 122" 126). These are important questions but, as Margaret Atwood points out, searching for common motives among writers for what they do is pointless (xxii). She lists, in a single paragraph of exhausting length, a string of unconnected writers' motives "taken from the words of writers themselves" as proof (xx). In response to Atwood, my author wrote in his journal: "She [Atwood] surmises that writing is to do with darkness and the desire to enter it, to illuminate and return with the elixir into the light" ("Notebook: EGL122"). In response to why he writes, his journal has the following record:

> I write to uncover the secrets of who I am inside – it helps shape my world and articulate responses to actions, thoughts, behaviours, ideas that affect me. I write to tell stories that have the potential to alter common understandings of issues affecting who we are. I write to get the screaming demons of other people's influences out of my head. I write to make me a better person, to engage an audience, to become fucking famous. ("Notebook: EGL122")

The last of these is yet to materialise (which quite honestly keeps us all in the dark), but his response to the question of what he is most interested in writing about is a little more

thoughtful. He says: “I write about issues of corruption of black-white divisions, of social injustice, of barriers to understanding” ("Notebook: EGL122").

I would suppose, though, that he sees his current motivation to write in a different light to those earlier days, but I also sense that much of the sentiment in that early statement still rings true. Moreover, it seems those issues are also present behind *Poetic Licence and the Refuge of Truth in the Political Thriller*, as if he had this inquiry in mind long before he realised it. I think it is important to point out, here, that my author is an opsimath. The implication of this is not just that he came to higher learning late in life, but that he also brought with him a history of experience as a professional writer and a teacher of writing, both of which impacted the way he engaged with his new learning and the questions he raised around it (for further discussion see Appendix 3 “The Scholar”).

Even though his new studies might “move [him] towards a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience” (Mezirow 5), we need to be aware that habits of mind such as values and beliefs and attitudes tend to alter in small increments, if at all. His belief in the importance of story, therefore, is unlikely to change. He wrote that “People look to story to make sense of the world and who they are. Without story, humankind is mute ("Notebook: EGL122"). The first part of that is paraphrasing Orvis (12). The second part, I rather like, and I would argue that he has drawn from Christopher Booker (*The Seven Basic Plots*) and Joseph Campbell (*The Hero With A Thousand Faces*) and I think he has made it his mission to support a theory that if the creative writer doesn’t pay attention to story, they too must be mute.

T.I.: Which brings me to the word ‘story’. You were recently challenged at a colloquium that you may be “in danger of essentialising story”[3]. Because this inquiry is about the role of story in creative writing practice, is that a real danger to connections between story and writer motivations?

A.L.: The word ‘story’ has been hijacked for all sorts of nefarious interests, capitalism among them. John Lahr points out that nowadays the stories we encounter on television and in the movies are designed for picking the “pockets of the public” (ix). It’s as though story is no longer thought of as a cultural experience that carries knowledge and history across “anthropological and historical boundaries” (Turner 11), but instead as an object that enables culture to be commodified – to its detriment, I might add. Jack Zipes is scathing in *Sticks and Stones* of the cultural homogenisation of children through stories promulgated by large media and entertainment corporations in pursuit of profit, pointing out the extreme difficulty adults and children face when they attempt to resist the crass influence of these organisations and make their own meaning from the stories they encounter (loc. 185). I said it to Gardner and Jarman, and I’ll say it to you: “If we continue to allow the culture industries to dominate the discourse, creative writing only serves the production values of those industries and ultimately will diminish in its capacity for creativity” (PL 28 [52]). Story has an essence as an important cultural marker, it shouldn’t be a slave to it.

And look how we also use story as a way of explaining how a particular phenomenon exists within the discourse of a wider field, becoming, as Christine Brooke-Rose says, a fashionable word in critical theory to represent “things” (122), even to represent and perhaps

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[3] The question was posed at the Murdoch University English and Creative Arts Colloquium, November 2019 by Dr Anne Surma.

redirect the discourse itself. Take, for example, Diane Donnelly's comment that "Creative writing's story in the academy tends to mimic this reflective cycling" ("Reshaping Creative Writing" 3). The reflective cycling Donnelly refers to as the 'story' is how the discipline of creative writing tends to look back on its recent history in order to wonder if things could have been done differently, if its place in the academy would be more favourable in that light, or if certain things would have been done at all. And Steve Healy's argument that how "creativity has become so central is largely [due to] a story of a major shift in values" (65). The 'story' Healy is referring to is how society's organisational age of the 20th century has given way to the values associated with the creative age of the early 21st century. That a story exists to explain how we find ourselves in a certain position is not uncommon – it is, after all, a reflection of experience – but what are the elements that make that understanding of "a shift of values" a story in the first place? Is creative writing actually 'telling' that story, as Donnelly suggests, or is it simply a historical narrative in which creative writing assumes the role of actor? Can we really view creativity's centrality as a 'story', as Healy implies, or is it just an emergent experience? Are these, in fact, appropriations of the term because we think we understand what is meant?

From where I sit, for story to exist, there must be two parties: a transmitter (storyteller) and a receiver (respondent), but the story is a cognitive experience that occurs in the mind of the respondent. If we take Frey's definition and apply it, it is the *experience* that "a narrative of consequential events involving worthy human characters who change as a result of those events" produces in the mind of the respondent *(Damn Good Novel* 72). Knowledge of the characters and events accumulate as the reception takes place, leading to a point at which an understanding about that knowledge is reached. When we think of it in this way, we can see how story is produced by effects generated in the mind of the transmitter but experienced in the mind of the receiver, which is why I have argued elsewhere that "story, as

the representative of creative writing, is the redefining force in a pursuit of [its] independence" (Price, "Rising Tension" 73).

T.I.: You spoke earlier of Mark Turner's definition of stories as "complex dynamic integrations of objects, actors, and events" (9). Is that at odds with what you have just described?

A.L.: I think Turner is *describing*, not *defining*. But I take his meaning of "objects" to be purpose, or goal, or even, perhaps, McGuffin – how Hitchcock described "the thing the spies cared everything about, but the audience cared nothing about" (Frey, *The Key* 168). We can translate Turner's point into 'someone doing something' as a purposeful action and commit that to a form of verbal expression detailing how those events take place. So, in its essential form, story *is* a type of narrative, but while all stories have a narrative, not all narratives are stories – and that's where an important differentiation occurs. As Frey points out, the events in a story have a consequential relationship; that is, event B could not happen without event A, and event B produces event C, and so on. An event must involve a human character (Turner's 'actor'), representing some human condition, and some transformation involving that human must occur as a result of the events (see Frey, *Damn Good Novel* 70 - 72). So, when a writer tells a story, they are exploring how some transformation occurs because of, and as part of, the events that are examined. For example, when someone bursts out with, "Let me tell you what happened to me today …" the hearer is expecting some consequential events to unfold that resulted in some transformative experience for the teller. The story helps the hearer identify with the teller's experience.

T.I.: How does our rapidly changing cultural landscape impact the role of story?

A.L.: Culture's impact on story is something of a worry in my opinion, especially how we understand and access stories and the effect on the way we teach creative writing.

John Lahr compares the practice of the playwright, whose story is delivered in the 'now' of a theatrical moment as an experience the video-attracted public would prefer to avoid. Katherine Haake laments how students tend not to get their ideas of what stories are from literature, but from "movies and TV, and now even video games" (80). These delivery systems have all become big business driving the commodification of story, which then leads to industrialised practices in their writing, and consequently must influence the way we teach it. I raise this issue with Elise Jarman in our meeting and the idea that Lipshitz wants creative writing to support an industrial model for the university (Price, "In Search of the Creative" 61; PL 28 [52]).

In her essay, "This Narrated Life", Maria Tumarkin picks up on many of these issues and is critical of the use of the term in its jargonised form, and the simplification associated with the media industries' ideas of public storytelling as a way of framing discourse so that it might follow a desired model and omit what might be otherwise discussed. I want my students to understand their relationship with story and what they are thinking about as the foundation of their writing, which goes in part to the question you raised above on essentialising story: it is in danger – not from me though – of becoming the media industry's hammer that treats everything as a nail. For a story to exist, it has to fulfil certain cognitive conditions, and irrespective of issues of appropriation and rhematic abuse, and regardless of its form, story's core structural questions remain the same: they are all part of the business of the creative writer in practice, and the drive to produce appears to be universally rooted in a need to unearth some observation and, through it, impact society in some way.

On Truth

T.I.: Would you agree, then, that writers tend to resist the idea of their work being driven by a moral imperative, but few would argue against it being a pursuit of new understanding or a desire to get at some aspect of truth?

A.L.: I think a writer's pursuit of some type of truth is buried deep in the psyche of the writer. Jean Malaquais told Norman Mailer he writes because "The only time I know the truth is when it reveals itself at the point of my pen" (5). But what becomes apparent is that writers discover that truth is hard to find and even more difficult to prove. A given truth, as Hazel Smith points out, is not the same for everyone, but rather there are "multiple versions of, or perspectives" on it (134). The writer needs access to these perspectives, and I argue that story is the gateway that grants this access.

We can see how this works in *Poetic Licence* where there are multiple perspectives on the issue of asylum, and each of us characters has a different version of the truth in terms of how asylum seekers affect society. And it is implied in the title of this thesis – *the refuge of truth in the political thriller*. Truth has a way of hiding behind convenient lies, and part of the fascination with story is the way a truth is revealed, the way it is brought into the light. Take Falullah's story as an example. Without her telling of the events that led her to Fremantle, we have no counter to Lamord's version of creating the circumstances for a story the Liberal National Party (LNP) can tell about the disastrous effect of 'illegal' boat arrivals on Australian society. As David Simon points out in *All The Pieces Matter*, writers have to be able to say

> 'It either happened or it didn't happen or is rumoured to have happened, but we're not quite sure.' With all three cases, it *could* have happened. The parameters of this universe make all of the outcomes plausible. (Abrams 115; emphasis added)

And, as in *The Wire* – and no doubt true for a great many thrillers – it is also the case in *Poetic Licence* that some things were made up, some things definitely happened, and some things were said to have happened, but at the heart of it is a point that somewhere in here lies a truth and somehow, you just have to get to it so others can see that this is how the world works (Abrams 115-116). *Poetic Licence* is a human drama and what makes it plausible is writing that stays true to the characters and the spine of integrity that runs through them. Sometimes the truth can only come out of the invention. Hemingway said writers have "the obligation to invent truer than things can be true ... to take what is not palpable and make it completely palpable and ... have it seem normal ... so that it can become a part of the experience of the person who reads it" (qtd. in Morley 3). In the end, the refuge of truth lies in the words.

T.I.: I guess we can't argue with that. Can you get creative writing students to think the same way?

A.L.: I regularly urge students to think about this question of why writers write because, in reality, we can't ascertain a motivation if all we can do is read what a writer has written – it is a failing of the 'learning writing from reading' model – the extant text can't tell us about the motivation behind its making, and this is what I am doing when a student suggests that "maybe we write because our thinking needs to find a place to be; if it just stays in our heads, it will rot, atrophy, decay, disappear" (PL 56 [80]).

T.I.: Yes, I rather like that. What does the Pullman reference that the student raises after that refer to?

A.L.: An essay called "Intention", in which Philip Pullman sets out to examine the part that intention plays in writing a book, and he says, "writers are not always trustworthy when they tell us about their intentions" (114). The student was responding to a comment

from another student who referenced that point. I thought it was a good observation and I wanted to know whether they – the students – thought the motive to write is the same thing as intention. I would argue that intention has a relationship with the purpose of the writing rather than the motivation, and a deep connection with the master effect wanted (see McCormack loc. 1623, ch. "The Master-Effect Wanted"; kindle ed.). I suspect that the difficulty of fully satisfying the master effect wanted is why Pullman says writers are possibly not trustworthy in their stated intentions. I think here he's tipping his hat to the difficulty of getting at truth; he prefers to think that writers can't really 'intend' their work to become something, but they can 'hope'. A lot about intention has to do with a writer's relationship with readers, who often feel they are in some sort of guessing game about what a writer intended to mean by what they have written; in other words, 'what's the truth here?'

But who's to say that a writer knows anything more about a set of events than a reader? A writer can't possibly allow for every reader's version of the truth, and some might suggest that a writer is not allowed to voice their version outside of the work itself. There is a kind of unwritten law that writers have no place telling readers, after the fact, what they meant by what is written; that doing so might interfere with a reader choosing their own path to the text. To this end, I'd say most writers intend for there to be space for the reader to bring their own experiences to the table, and what they will experience will close a gap between the writer's experience and theirs. So, I continue to return to the idea that a motive for writing is more often aligned with some truth that must be got at, and that truth might be different for the reader and the author.

T.I.: There's a time later in *Poetic Licence* when you are being driven to a lunch meeting you know nothing about; you are deeply introspective, you muse on a refrain from Basho and you suddenly blurt: "We write … because we resist." When the driver queries

you, you say it is “a conversation between me and my conscience” (257 [281]). Can you explain what you mean by that?

A.L.: Yes, well, we do occasionally get flashes of genius. Look at it like this: the writer, or the storyteller if you prefer, embarks on a similar experience to a journey, from which there can never be a full and complete return. And it is because every next embarkation point will be modified by the truth of the previous journey (Royle), and that truth comes about because the storyteller conducts an experiment on a human condition by taking a character and subjecting them to conflict, which produces transformation, either in the character or their circumstances. The idea of resistance is the need to push back against the notion that we can always go back to where we were, that nothing has changed in the past. But of course, both of those things are impossible and the only way I think we can come to terms with it is through making art, because through art, we can revisit the previously lived experience, and by that, judge the success or otherwise of the experiment. And that, of course, is the art of story and what results in an authorial transformation (see discussion in Conclusion).

Novelistic Approaches

T.I.: I take it the title of the novel, *Poetic Licence*, refers to what has been described as “a duly notarised certificate long lost to the bottom drawer of [your] desk which lends [you] charter to delve into great mysteries” ("A Murder of Darlings" 61). What are the origins of this and what are the implications for its use as title?

A.L.: Look, I can’t talk about the origins of this: to do so would be breaking all sorts of covenants between a character and his author, and that would, indeed, be more than a *bit* of a worry. However, I can say that my view of the role of writer doesn’t necessarily accord with my author’s view of himself as writer. I think there is a place for textual simplicity and

for privileging “storytelling over the self-conscious technical experiments of the likes of B. S. Johnson or Italo Calvino” (Head 246), but poetic licence doesn’t have to be shunned altogether to bring about a coherent story, and I think, here, my author is having a little poke at the elitism of literary craft by insisting there is a place for the linearity often found in the structure of the political thriller to sit side by side with the more convoluted expression of the literary novel. Of course, it could come in for some criticism because, as one commentator has noted, it “hovers uncomfortably between racy thriller and meta self-reflection, bordering on parody” (note by P Williams in his examination of the thesis). But, in his defence, I think my author has created a work that embodies poetic licence, and parody is very much part of a package that triggers deep reflection of practice while maintaining discipline in regard to the craft of story.

And I think, here, we need to have an honest look at craft. There’s an academic view, often down the nose, of writers on craft in creative writing that has long worried me and it points to the importance of language in titles. The notion that identifying a book with ‘How to …’ in its title somehow makes it less scholarly than something with a more esoteric title, even when that writer might have taught the craft in an erstwhile academic institution for many years, needs to be addressed. Granted, many such books might be serving the economic interests of the culture industries and contain very narrow scholarship, but equally true, many contain poignant discussions on skills and theory drawn from years of teaching and practice frequently overlooked by academia, and I believe Frey’s canon falls into this as do many others (see bibliography).

One such example of this academic snobbery is Julienne van Loon’s review of McKee’s *Story*. She prefaces her review with a statement that the “book suffers from the same disease many Hollywood-based scriptwriting ‘how-to’ books suffer from … it frequently has that dreadful self-help/motivational tone about it” ("Having it out with Robert"

para. 2). Right from the get-go, her bias is evident through the choice of adjectives employed, and it demonstrates the clearest illustration of the gaping hole in much of creative writing pedagogy my author highlights in his autobiographical treatise in Appendix 3. Had she, for example, read Frey and taught from his theories and skills, she would not have faced the question she reports in the final paragraph of her article from a Masters student about why she (the student) did not know what are basic principles of story craft. As McCormack says, "The elements of craft are so well understood they have been anatomized and codified, and therefore they can be taught and systematically applied" (loc. 319; kindle ed.). My question is, 'Why are they not?' A writer's art is something developed through the application of a deep understanding of craft and while "the writer can be taught craft; [they] cannot be taught art" (loc. 319; kindle ed.).

My author's employment of the term 'poetic licence' helps dispel the myths that there is any one way to solve complex writing problems and affords the writer-as-investigator "that liberty whereby a poet, in order to render his compositions more striking, allowably deviates from what is considered true" (Vigors 15). I think the power of story, as much as anything else, licences the writer to meet their obligation "to create entirely new ways for people to relate to each other" (Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne cited in Head 246), and craft plays a central role in that obligation.

T.I.: You said earlier that story is a "movement of writerly activity". What other aspects of movement are tied up with this?

A.L.: I also think there is a case for stories to move forward from beginning to end, in a linear fashion, but I agree with Morley that they move on the back of characters and the truth they are exposing (*Introduction to Creative Writing* 169). I think our earlier discussions make that point quite clear. Knowing what provides the energy to move the character that the writer can tap into springs from multiple wells: from "tri-dimensional-character bone

structure" (Egri 37); from conflict; from the unexpected – which can range from a lottery win to the sudden death of a family member – and from coincidence, which often emerges unbidden from the writing. There is also an argument that the writer must make the space for arrivals via "invocation" (Hyde 146), allowing the unbidden to come into the work under suspension of evaluation.

Everything a character does is a movement, and every movement must be designed to advance the story toward its inevitable conclusion. Sol Stein's claim that the writer's biggest enemy is often themselves is most obvious when writers don't take character motivations seriously enough to make sure a character's actions are credible (ch. 15). By this he means the character must be correctly placed to carry out the action being described, that the action is part of the truth for that character, and for which there needs be a necessary objective correlative[4]. Stein points to a technique called 'planting' to make sure that a character's actions can be explained credibly by providing a reason for that action. So, when Kelly Boulter arrives at my office intent on search and arrest (PL 174 [198]), her motivation to do so is planted earlier in her discovery of the true identity of Hunter and her abhorrence of being lied to by me (152 [176]). Boulter is motivated by a high and noble sense of justice, so when she feels justice is being compromised, she takes action to correct it: action intended to hinder my progress and tempt me away from my path. Her source of energy is justice being served. If we compare this to Hunter, who is also motivated by a high and noble sense of justice, we find that, while their energies come from similar source material, the way they

[4] Objective correlative is one of T.S. Eliot's most important critical ideas which he explained as: The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ''objective correlative''; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (Cooper, 34)

achieve it, what they consider a fair verdict in the court of poetic justice is different. Hunter is motivated to take actions that help me in my quest and weighs up the moral dimensions of that pursuit.

In some ways, their purposes are quite similar too: Boulter wants to go back to Major Crimes with a promotion, she believes she deserves it and is being unjustly held back, and Hunter wants the threat to his life lifted so he can live undisguised. They have different dimensions, but the fundamental object – to be free from suppression – is similar. What is curious about these two, and the way their motivation pairs them, is they are in opposition on their methodologies and evaluations (Phillips and Huntley 64), but it is that very opposition that brings the moral values of the story into focus, and that is their character function.

T.I.: Can you say that motivation is a single characteristic?

A.L.: Not at all. Boulter might, in her police work, be motivated by her sense of justice, but she is a complex character, with other dimensions. Her son, for example, is a source of energy – it was because of his disappearance at a young age that she became a forensics specialist (PL 146-147 [170-171]). Hunter is also motivated by family, reflecting on when he can be reconciled with his daughter (49 [73]). David Lodge tells us that there are several drives emerging from multiple levels of personality that give rise to any action in fiction (*The Art of Fiction* 183), and this is certainly the case of the driver characters in *Poetic Licence.* The concept of 'driver' and 'passenger' characters was developed by Phillips and Huntley in *Dramatica*. They describe driver characters are those the reader sees whose actions and decisions propel the story forward – essentially the protagonist who acts to achieve the goal of the story, the antagonist who acts against that, the guardian who acts to support the protagonist, and (an archetype Philips and Huntley coined) the contagonist (32-33) who acts to tempt the protagonist from that goal.

In *Poetic Licence*, as the protagonist, it is my job to seek out the truth that will lead to Falullah's freedom, while Roger Lamord is dead against that happening – the last thing he wants is a free Falullah to implicate him in murder, people trafficking, and corruption. I believe that knowing the truth about Fallulah's situation will set her free; Lamord believes the truth needs to stay hidden. The central conflict of this story is fought between him and me over her freedom, and whatever actions or decisions either of us take affects that possibility. Hunter acts as a guardian character, what Vogler in *The Writer's Journey* might call a mentor (12), and Boulter is a contagonist – possibly otherwise thought of as a Threshold Guardian (Vogler) – preventing my access to inner secrets that would help me short-cut my way to the truth. Hunter wants to help me get Falullah to safety by removing obstacles that threaten her life and guide me along the right path; Boulter wants to deflect me from that path, have me turn Falullah into Immigration and stay out of police business. These dynamics are what effectively propel the story forward.

T.I.: Is Roger Lamord motivated by political aspirations?

A.L.: Not for himself, but certainly for his party and his sponsored candidate. Lamord revels in influence and his use of influence to make or break people. He understands great power, and even despite the way his pursuit of ego gratification motivates him to an image of himself lifted above the stereotypes of his class (Booker 136, 335), he knows the power of silence and listening. He is under no illusion that I pose a threat to him, referring to me as "some hack writer" (PL 186 [210]), which is little more than an extension to his view that "he found money to be a small cog in the greater wheel of earthly fortunes" (69 [93]).

What enables Lamord's propulsion of the story is his circle of influence. First, those under his direct control, Sean Dower and Samantha Codlin, will do whatever is asked of them to ensure success in the election and the actions and decisions they take will influence his

actions and decisions. For example, Lamord holds Sean Dower responsible for Falullah's escape (74, 109 [198, 133]). Then there are those he conspires with, Max Glendinning and Wally Lipschitz in particular, but also the hidden faces of the LNP and Enzo Gordioni, who will take up his cause, and influence Boulter's and my actions and decisions in our efforts to bring murderers to justice.

Those within the circle of influence are what we might consider 'passenger' characters, because they don't influence events directly, but they influence those who do (Phillips and Huntley 33-36). When you look at it closely, each of us driver characters have a few passengers around us: Donna Gardner, Lavender Jensen, Wi Fi, and Nick Fairgough around me; Superintendent Ewen McPherson, Detectives Baxter, Parker, Robinson, and the homeless kid Spider around Boulter; Falullah, Mick Porter, Gordioni, Dower, Swaddick and Dosek around Hunter, for example. And through these networks each character has some relationship with me, forming a complex web that accounts for the dynamics of the action and gives the reader a chance to define us as complex representations of some human condition, get involved with our causes, and take part in the progress forward that is the story (Truby ch. 4).

T.I.: What motivates you, Art?

A.L.: Well, if you think about what I just said, you will come to three conclusions. One: there is no story without characters. Two: none of those other characters would be there without me. Three: There would be no me without those other characters. Justice doesn't interest me, greed and influence don't interest me, but freedom does. And people who threaten the freedom of the most disadvantaged in our society, threaten freedom for us all. I know that I push back against it, but I think my poetic licence is really what motivates me to act, and the way I can best help others to act is to teach them to write. Because, by writing, we resist. The teleological sense of that would be "I teach writing because I have a poetic

licence", which, as an emergent experience, is logical because the object is to teach creative writing, the pursuit of which emerges from actions of specific elements playing on that desire, but the outcome is greater than the sum of the parts – at least the effect that is experienced as outcome. Desire usually changes through the course of the story and, in the end, the emergent experience may be different from the original intention, because, when it all boils down, we all have a self-organising biology that makes us purposeful (Alexander 9).

So, when you hear authors talking about how their characters have minds and lives of their own and take over the story, it is this semiotic emergence that they experience, and this is simply because a character is purposefully designed as a purposeful entity, and that means they must, to some extent, be part of the cause of any action in which they are involved. And this is somewhat out of the author's hands and left to invocation.

Day Two | Methodology

Art Lazaar combines creative writing as research and practice to view the way things are done through the lens of a creatively critical and critically creative consciousness, positioning story in the field, exploring the choice of a political thriller and considering theories of story as starting points.

Practice, performance, and research

T.I.: How do you explain the relationships between the different components of this research?

A.L.: *Poetic Licence* is the primary research and it is a 'performance' of creative writing as research: exploring what is not yet known, generating thinking, bringing into being what doesn't yet exist. It is an emergent experience where the making of knowledge happens alongside the making itself; but it rests on a body of existing scholarship, which is what we are exploring here in this exegesis, where the scholar is at work drawing on the making of a novel in which the writer is at work, and which contains images of the teacher espousing novel values of pedagogy. I said before that the academy tends to view scholars, writers, and teachers differently, even if they are the same person, so the way this inquiry is structured views these identities as 'performances', all of which have a relationship with knowledge: its excavation, its making, its imagining, its bringing into the light, and its dissemination.

Springgay calls this a method in which creative practice is engaged as the "means through which one *inquires* into an educational phenomena through artistic and aesthetic means" ("A/r/tography as Living Inquiry" 898; emphasis in original). The educational phenomena being investigated here, of course, is the teaching of creative writing, which is performed through an image of me in *Poetic Licence,* but it is being investigated in a fictional universe with a fictional relationship between fictional teacher and fictional students. The

scholarship surrounding it is being explored by you and me in this conversation – again, fictional. Images, of course, do not have to exist outside of the imagination, so the idea that the rendering of an image of 'performance' as an integral part of a novel is, of course, not a new idea. However, in order to explore the scholarly aspects of this multi-levelled inquiry, the creative practice is extended to invoke a fictocritical response to scholarship, and while that, like the a/r/tographic approach discussed above also exists in a liminal space between reality and fantasy, the fictocriticism of this inquiry is deeply reflexive, calling for the product of the creative actions (me, as principle character in *Poetic Licence*) to offer up a commentary on the actions of the creator (my author) in a discussion with you (the interviewer), all of whom exist in what might best be thought of as a space Phelan and Rogoff call "without".

This space, as Rogoff says, "assumes that [the scholar] had a model, to begin with" (34). The model here is the style of interview often reserved for celebrity writers in which they are expected to share their knowledge and wisdom of their practice which might be accessed and made use of by writers, scholars, and teachers. Of course, I am no such celebrity, and while some criticism may be levelled at my author for using me as a mere mouthpiece, it is important for me to point out that this is an inquiry set up to *listen* as much as it is to *espouse*. My author wants to hear his own ideas fed back to him along with other scholarship that might give them foundation. In the end, though, any idea that empirical knowledge in this field can be considered irrefutable fact is questionable, so we must listen, because that is how we access opinions about how things work and the research enables those opinions to form new ways of thinking about emergent experiences.

T.I.: What about the autobiography your author offers in the appendices. What does that contribute?

A.L: I think it's fair to say that any attempt to inquire into subjective notions such as the role of story in creative writing practice needs to have some historical context, and an autoethnographic contribution provides this context. He is asking not only for recognition that his research is listening, but also that his research be listened to, and providing a framework through which it might be heard recognises the difficulty of listening while speaking. It also helps emphasise the critical relationship between 'teller' and 'hearer' that is integral to story and narrative, and how, often, the writer can only shape the work following critical listening to what is being said about it by the characters involved. This is not a plot to destabilise the complex relationships between the novel, its exegesis, me, and my author that we have already discussed, but to draw your attention to the concept that it is in the relationships between these forces from which the emergent experiences evolve, not from the objects themselves.

Story vis-a-vis Narrative and Plot

T.I.: Speaking of relationships, how does the relationship between story, narrative, and plot impact the role of story and the creative writer?

A.L.: It is certainly a challenge to try and pin a specific and unified meaning on 'story'. It seems more usual for scholars to discuss the story-*telling* and why we tell stories rather than what it is we tell (Booker; Jones; Kearney; Thomas King; Pullman; Truby). One of van Loon's reasonable criticisms of McKee, in my opinion, is that he authored a book called *Story*, but made no attempt to define what he meant by it (para. 3). Perhaps, as Dara Marks suggests in her thesis "The Transformative Functions of Story", that it is to do with the nature of story being "so comprehensive that it may be possible to conclude that *story is the sum of all human consciousness"* (87; emphasis in original). Conceptually, 'story' fits into a space similar to Terry Eagleton's discussion of 'culture', which he suggests is multifaceted, and eludes the idea of a firm definition (Eagleton viii). Kevin Avruch argues that "much of

the difficulty [of defining culture] stems from the different usages of the term as it was increasingly employed in the nineteenth century" (qtd. in Spencer-Oatey 1). And I did say earlier that 'story' is frequently hijacked for purposes that might not fit our usual understanding of the term, so it seems reasonable to mount an argument that 'story' suffers in a similar way to 'culture'. 'Narrative' could well be heading the same way, too, with so many political and corporate voices clamouring for 'control of the narrative' or, as Eric Forst says, to "help companies communicate with customers in engaging and effective ways, to 'quickly understand the narrative'" (qtd. in Healy 76).

It makes me think that lines need to be drawn and some sense of identity allocated to these terms because there remains a constant struggle to make clear what is under discussion when the subject is 'story', a struggle that has implications not just for the practising creative writer, but also for those teaching creative writing. We can take, for example, Jeffrey Katzenberg's position: "the story is what people remember" ("The World Is Changing" 15). It seems clear in his statement, but what exactly is he talking about? In *Monsters Under the Bed*, Melrose frequently combines 'narrative' and 'story' into verbal phrases 'story narrative' or 'narrative of a story', quite clearly implying a separation of concepts in which, by writerly activity, the effect is represented: one the telling, the other, the experience. He says: "The narrative of a story exists implicitly in the experience it presents to be explored" (loc. 1823).

In *The Art of Writing Fiction*, Andrew Cowan writes that he has students discuss the terms 'story' and 'plot' and asks them to come up with "a one-sentence definition of 'story', three characteristics of a story, and a one-sentence definition of 'plot'" (143). The discussion following the exercise, he says, is never the same twice, although two responses somewhere within the discussion will be consistent: One, that there will be confusion over the terminology between 'story' and 'plot'; and, two, there will be a consensus that a story will have a "beginning, middle and end" (143), a concept widely attributed to Aristotle as a

foundational aspect of story. But, as Aristotle says, “the dramatist is bound by *tragic* necessity, not by the plausible sequence of biographical or historical events” (Aristotle et al. Aristotle's Poetics 113-114; emphasis in original). This all suggests to me that the ‘beginning-middle-end’ concept belongs to plot rather than story or narrative (see Belknap ch. 8). Also, a narrative both precedes and extends beyond a point at which a story might be deemed to begin or end (Miller "The Problematic of Ending in Narrative" 59). So, when we’re teaching creative writing, we need to explore ideas around these three words that impact the way a writer might go about their pursuit of story. As we talked about earlier, the experience of story takes place in the mind of the respondent, although, I believe it is fair to say that it gets there by means of a narrative act, and its meaning emerges through its plot.

T.I.: Why do you think there is a problem in teaching it? Story as creative writing, I mean.

A.L.: You know, all of us have been surrounded by stories all our lives so I guess it seems natural for those teaching the subject to assume that we, just, somehow, know what it is. I think that’s a worry. But Cowan’s little classroom experience makes it quite plain that we don’t automatically know what it is. Katharine Haake writes in “To Fill With Milk” of how she came to realise that giving students an assignment to write a story was specious (80). If a student does not know what a story is, what it does, can they be reasonably expected to write one? There is a need to begin a creative writing course with a discussion on how we understand story, and teach it: an approach my author makes abundantly clear in his teaching and theory manual *Story Craft* (Price ch. 1).

I would further argue that, for the creative writer, story is a ‘movement of writerly activity’. That is, it is an experience of change that emerges from the writing itself, which is, by the way, what renders creative writing a research methodology in the context of this inquiry. We can think of this as an effect generated through the properties of ‘interality’. In

"Interality Shows Through", Shang talks of the spacetime which is present in and around all things; it is what enables objects or activity to exist, and allows change to occur by recognising that

> Order, distance, placement, temporality, aggregation, interval, intermittence, openness, and so forth, are attributes of a thing's arrangement. None of these interalogical attributes are traditionally conceived as those of a particular thing, but they nevertheless determine a thing's existence and state of Being. ("Interality Shows Through" 73),

So, when we are creative writing, we are exercising an indulgence with spacetime because the experience, or meaning if you prefer, produced by the creative writing is not yet in existence. As the movement of writerly activity, story is the pursuit, but the emergent experience is the purpose.

On the other hand, narrative is the way the movement of writerly activity is given form, the action that 'realises' through this interalogical arrangement. Too great, or misdirected, focus on narrative theories as the tools for teaching creative writing, as Melrose alludes to in *Write for Children* (11), can subvert the role that story plays because the fundamentals of what makes story what it is; that is, what story *does*, may be overlooked in a pedagogy that pursues the teaching of writing as a narrative action, ignoring the need for – and, therefore, the skills leading to – finding a story to generate an effect from the writing, and writing to serve that effect wanted.

T.I.: The 'effect wanted' seems to be a centrepiece of your thesis; is this where plot comes in?

A.L.: Cowan says if he were to respond to his own class exercise, he might describe: "a story as 'a sequence of connected events having a beginning, middle and end', and a plot

as ‘a sequence of connected events having a beginning, middle and end, though not necessarily in that order’” (144). Plot, in his view, is the action of the storyteller shaping the incidents in sequence. While a story may form its basis, E. M. Forster says in *Aspects of the Novel*, that plot is “an organism of a higher type” (30), and he later describes it as the narrative of events “falling on causality” (85), either maintaining or suspending the time-sequence of the original incidents. But, again, there is great confusion around what is meant here. Robert L. Belknap explains, when first reading about literary plots, that he found himself in “a forest of multilingual terminology”. So, in an effort to keep his terminology clear, he describes literary plots as “purposeful arrangements of experience” (4). I take the ‘experience’ he refers to as that which the writer is attempting to transfer through the act of telling. Booker describes plots as “shaping forms that lie beneath the surface of stories” (6). This got me thinking about these terms as a hierarchy of concepts: the narrative is the recount or telling of events, the story is the consequential nature of the events (the drama that gives rise to changing circumstances) and the plot is the way the telling is arranged to provide heightened, or even meet expected, levels of experience.

T.I.: How did these words find their way into the English language?

A.L.: ‘Story’, in English, is borrowed from the French *storie*, a variant of Anglo-Norman and Old French *estoire* (OED "story, n."). Its earliest use in English is dated around 1225, where it overlapped ‘history’ and carried the (now obsolete) definition of: “An oral or written narrative account of events that occurred or are believed to have occurred in the past; a narrative account accepted as true by virtue of great age or long tradition” (def. 1a). Now, though, in all but the sense of “Traditional, poetic, or romantic legend or history; folklore, myth, or legend belonging to a particular culture or period” (def. 3c), all definitions which refer to factual accounts of happenings are considered obsolete. The currently accepted definitions refer more to a narrative of events, real or fictitious (def. 3a), composed for the

entertainment of the listener or reader (def. 3b). We can surmise that the cause of "the entertainment" arises from how plot has subsequently come to affect story.

To me, 'narrative' is the most problematic of the three terms because of the frequency with which it is used interchangeably with story. We learn from OED that it came into English from French some 200 years later than story as an adjective (c1450), and only later, in 1539, was it nominalised. It does worry me, though, that the word 'narrative' is used in OED's definition of 'story' based on an etymology in which 'narrative' did not yet exist. How does that work? I wonder. In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White sources 'narrative's' roots "via the Latin *gnarus* ('knowing,' 'acquainted with,' 'expert,' 'skilful,' etc) and *narrb* ('relate,' 'tell') from the Sanskrit root *gna* ('know')" (215). In "Narrative Theory and Aesthetics in Literature" Didier Coste informs us that the French adjective '*narratif*' has never been nominalised as it has in English, and although they are fully equivalent adjectives, "we translate the English noun 'narrative' as '*récit*' [in French]" (5). According to OED, récit refers to the told component of a literary work, excluding dialogue, so, in narrative, we are performing recital without dramatic devices. This leads me to think that we ought to be concerned with how we interpret French-inspired structuralism and its influence on our academic understanding of reading and writing.

Then there's plot. In its application to literary thinking, plot comes along almost 100 years later again with indeterminate origins and refers to the plan or scheme of a literary work "considered or presented as an interrelated sequence" (OED "plot" def. 6). Belknap tells us that plot carries with it two meanings which survive Aristotle's mythos: "the organisation of the incidents in a literary work, or the story that can be summarised" (5), although he argues that the subject of plot summaries is deserving of far greater scrutiny.

T.I.: Is it a question, then, of whether a narrative contains story, or a story contains narrative? How do we understand it today?

A.L.: Put simply, narrative represents an arrangement of more than one event (Rudrum 196), but more importantly, because it *represents* the events, it enables readers to generate temporal meaning by the way the events are assembled because it is a function of the act of telling. Story, on the other hand, is the experience that is transferred through that telling plus the dramatic action inferred by dialogue. In "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative", Barthes says "the function of narrative is not to 'represent'; it is to put together a scene which still retains a certain enigmatic character for the reader" (271). But what I think he is saying is that it is not the function of the telling (the récit) to *represent,* but to impart knowledge, which suggests that he is critical of the discourse that insists narrative somehow "substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted" (qtd. in White 2).

And, while we're on the subject of Barthes, can I just draw your attention to the fact that his "Structural Analysis" article that I mentioned above was originally published under the title "Introduction a l' analyse structurale des récits" (237)? The original title, to my way of thinking, would then render the meaning slightly differently to our common English usage of it, because we can't really be sure, without the original thinking in French, whether Barthes is referring to the action of the narrator, a recitation, or the object of the narration, which is sometimes story. It seems to me that this is possibly where the confusion of understanding what exactly is meant by one or the other term possibly lies.

T.I.: Where do you think the relationship of narrative with story and creative writing is today?

A.L.: Definitely, a worry, I think. In Hayden White's view, narrative fulfils a human need for the translation of knowledge into something told (1). We continue to think of this knowledge as events, or a sequence of events. An event can only exist if it's been observed, allowing, of course, that an observation may be reconstructed from historically located

evidence, such as the demise of the dinosaurs. Turning that knowledge into something told involves representing time in relation to the sequence of events, but time is a human construct: it exists only as a means of interality – the spaces between, in, through, and around events (see Shang "Interality Shows Through"). A narrative explication provides us with a way of organising events and occurrences so we can make them concrete in memory, and that gives us an understanding that time has passed, or is passing, relative both to the events and the telling.

We learn from Chatman in *Story and Discourse* that the structuralist view of narrative argues that it is constructed of two parts: the chain of events that are being told about, and the means by which those events are communicated (19). Chatman argues that the chain of events is story, "actions or happenings", but this notion, as do Forster's definition of story (86), Gardner's (*On becoming a novelist* xiv), and Cowan's (144), leaves out two important aspects that Frey argues in *Damn Good Novel*: that the events of story must be consequential, not merely sequential or connected; and some experience of transformation in the character or their circumstances must occur for story to be present (70-72). Take, for example, recounting the events surrounding a crime, such as the account given in *Poetic Licence* by Det. Kelly Boulter.

> On Friday the second, at six-thirty a.m., the bin was found at the verge, of 23 Morrison Street, Hamilton Hill, here … by Carlos Chavez, resident. Mister Chavez had returned from his night shift at Henderson where he works as a welder in a shipbuilding yard. His rubbish collection usually occurs at about seven-thirty on a Friday and it's his habit, when he's on night shift, to put the bin out when he gets home. He saw this bin as he drove in and thought his wife may have already done it, which, if that were so, he says, was very unusual. But when he parked his car up the driveway, here … their bin was still by the back door. He took his bin out and then

> looked into this one and saw a plastic sheet. When he lifted the top of it, he discovered the feet of a body that had been placed headfirst in the bin. To avoid them being collected, Mister Chavez then moved both his bin and this one back from the curb, here. (198-199 [222-123])

Kelly Boulter's account is expressing knowledge of events in a sequence based on Mr Chavez's actions, but no more. It is a simple recount, and not a story because there is no sense of a transformation of character or circumstance.

Didier Coste says, though, that "when a policeman reports on his night patrols in the morning … they more often than not tell complete or fragmented stories" (2). In which case, such an account would include causes and consequences affecting the people involved, and the changes that occurred, or purpose, as a result. It would report some emotional experience, some rising action, conflict, interpretation, and some climax to the action, such as this example from Michael Connelly's *Dark Sacred Night.*

> Ballard recounted her investigation, putting the facts in an order that would intrigue the judge and build towards a conclusion of probable cause. She said Jacob Cady had now been missing for forty-eight hours and was not responding to any communication, ranging from his cell phone to his business website. She told the judge that the man living in Cady's condo had given a false name but left out Prada's explanation that he was in the process of legally changing it. She said Prada had expressed a reluctance to cooperate, leaving out that he had been awakened by her at one a.m.
>
> Lastly, she mentioned the rug and her suspicion that it had been moved to cover up something. (240)

The notion that Ballad is putting the facts "in an order" … building towards a "conclusion of probable cause", suggests that, in her judgement, some knowledge is of less value than other knowledge, and this particular arrangement of her experience – a plot – is structured purposefully to elicit a specific understanding about the circumstances in which she is placed. So, it is not merely communicating knowledge, as narrative implies. Hearing it in that way, and reaching that understanding, means the judge has had an 'experience of story': the events are narrated consequentially, but with purposeful gaps the judge is expected to fill in, and those events show evidence or promise of transformation in character. The creative writer needs to be clear about these differences, and they need to be taught as part of the practice of writing.

Finding the Way In

T.I.: You're a teacher of creative writing, how do you answer the question, the one that suggests so clearly that there is alchemy at work, "Where do you get your ideas?"

A.L.: I think back to Henry James and his notion of the germinal idea in The *Art of The Novel*, and how his friend Turgenieff, describing the source of germinal ideas, told him: "We have to go too far back, too far behind, to say" (qtd. in James 43; emphasis in original). It is not as if writers don't know how to find ideas, but to identify exactly from where they emerge is a much tougher ask. It could be imagination, but I think it has more to do with what Thomas McCormack calls a 'prelibation', an effect wanted, by which he means "to indicate a longing or craving or appetite the specific satisfier of which is not yet named" (loc. 912; kindle ed.). There is a sensation that something is needed to satisfy a desired effect, but we can't yet, or immediately, put our finger on precisely what that something is. It is a curious experience – by which I mean it is an experience of curiosity, not an experience *deserving* of

our curiosity – and we are driven by it to try and find what the specific satisfier might be, because only by finding it will we be able to understand its full effect.

There is a strange recognition of yearning that leads to imagination, a two-part activity making up the second and third stage of four that complete creative action according to McCormack. Nudged by this yearning, "imagination comes up with events or other ingredients that will do the trick" (loc. 923; kindle ed.); that is, the trick of satisfying the prelibation. And then, using that image, imagination's second act is to seek out the words to express it: the verbal solution to render the required image. The fourth and final stage in the cycle is what McCormack identifies as "sensibility" (loc. 925; kindle ed.), where the writer tests the proposed solution against the originating prelibation for fit. If it fits, the writer accepts it and moves on; if not they return to the prelibation, interrogate that, and repeat the cycle. This cycle can go on several times for any one of a great many creative acts in making a novel.

T.I.: So, is that a long labour, or is it lightning quick, and how do you to ensure success every time?

A.L.: You'd be silly if you think you can guarantee its success every time, but you can get close by recognising the value of failure and understanding where the true heart of art lies. By failure, I mean two things: learning to appreciate when, in the first place, something is needed to be added to the work, a new effect wanted to smooth over a *créneau* that may not be visible to the naked eye; and when something does not meet the artistic or aesthetic values needed to satisfy the original prelibation. Without this understanding of failure, the pursuit will likely fall short, or veer off course and that'd be something of a worry, I'd say.

But for me, as a teacher, the worry is getting students (and probably more importantly, teachers) to realise how much practice is required, along with the need to

develop a highly critical ear to the text *as it is forming*. Egri's Dialectical Approach (ch. 3) is a useful skill to learn for this. A writer can sense a prelibation and then form a *thesis* about the ingredients that will satisfy it, then mount an *antithesis* to that and, through repetition and multiple applications, come across a *synthesis* that meets the demands of sensibility. A prelibation is a sensation of change. If we have a satisfactory solution, we will transform the moment, the story will move forward and move in the desired direction. As Egri points out, dialectics is the foundation of all movement and we are always seeking to find the path towards an opposite: a character is growing towards a different state of being. And we learn from the *I Ching* that all worldly phenomena is in constant motion towards its opposite – everything contains its opposite within, and it is this force that produces tendencies of deviation that we sense as change, which in turn becomes transformation (Wilhelm 282-283). Sometimes the right solution comes instantly, at other times its pursuit can dog the writer for weeks, months, years.…

Part of the problem, McCormack says, is that we tend to turn first to imagination, but he argues that it is not as close to the "heart of art" as often thought, and more attention directed to the study of "prelibation" is likely to yield greater success (loc. 990; kindle ed.). Teachers of creative writing need to place a greater emphasis on understanding, recognising, and working with 'the idea' and a concept of prelibation, and not assume that students simply know what we are talking about when we ask them to come up with ideas. I think, far too often, this is overlooked in our study and teaching of creative writing, especially with our over-reliance on analysis and criticism in that teaching.

T.I.: In *Creative Writing and the New Humanities,* Paul Dawson describes imagination in the nineteenth century as "overworked and exhausted" leading to its being replaced by creativity (42). Is he referring to this initiating activity of prelibation when he refers to the "noble faculty"?

A.L.: The “noble faculty” is Wordsworth’s reference to the human capacity to produce poetry, for which, today, I think we can safely substitute art. But it can’t be reduced to merely creativity or imagination because doing so ignores, or steps over, the prelibation in McCormack’s movements of practice that I talked about, suggesting, instead, that the appearance of poetry or art is spontaneous, and the realisation occurs in that same instance. A prelibation is fleeting, and it is within its subsequent imaginings where lies a truth that must be got at, the revelation of which brings the satisfaction into view. The creative act must lie in not just seeing the truth, but in the methods employed to get at it and reveal it. And, in order to expose a particular truth, the writer may need to build a world of fantasy, visit a history, embody the human condition in characters who are not of usual human form, use the full powers of poetry to express the meaning, manipulate the order of events. But, irrespective of how it is done, there is no escaping the fundamental fact that all of these acts of writing are driven by some salivant foretaste of an “effect wanted” (McCormack loc. 1052; kindle ed.) in which the satisfying taste is artistic or aesthetic rather than gastronomous, and the full execution of that effect is what is required to produce art.

T.I.: You say to your class: “It’s not just the seeing, but the ways of seeing and in a strange twist in the *now* meets with the *possible*, as though you, as writer, stand in the future as observer observing the observation you have just made in the present” (PL 17-18 [41-42]; emphasis in original). What does that mean?

A.L.: I think it is a pretty clumsy sentence, and one could argue from a writer that’s a bit of a worry, but it was uttered in the heat of teaching … so I don’t think its meaning is beyond grasp. There is this experience I call ‘the curious observation’. It is a moment in which a glimpse of the future collapses into the present which can only be viewed as the past. Derrida, Ricoeur, Hadyn White … all their different theoretical work ultimately suggest one important point about time: that it is a construct used to understand ‘différance’, that it is

always being deferred and divided and ultimately dissolved into nothingness, that time inside a narrative is different to that outside (Dowling ch. 3; Woehrling 81).

Story can't exist without narrative; therefore, it can't exist without time. Time is required because it functions as an examination of linear and coincidental human experiences, and this is the way humanity understands its relationship with the cosmos: that there is a beginning, and there will likely be an end, and all that passes between is what we consider time. Although, our own end is not the same as the world's end, and it is into this paradox that Ricoeur introduces the idea of a "'third time' of narrative in which consciousness discovers the alternative possibility of an external reality that belongs to the mind or soul alone" (Dowling 35). An idea 'striking the mind' is an example of this third time – the lightning bolt effect if you like. It produces a moment in the mind in which events crash together, accompanied by an uncanny sense of disembodiment in that moment – as I say, standing in the future as observer observing the observation you have just made.

You may have gathered that observation is critical. McCormack insists, "writers always start with an observation" (loc. 2197; kindle ed.) and we have already discussed this quite a lot. But, to take it a little bit further, it suggests that the novelist experiences a "master effect wanted" in mind, itself containing some snippet of knowledge, some truth lying dormant and wanting for revelation (loc. 1142, 2189 ; kindle ed.). It may not at first be obvious; its interest might be tenuous. We find this in Frey's discussion in *The Key* of how the idea of "*The Blue Light*" [emphasis in original] occurred while driving late at night and he saw a beam of blue light reaching into the sky somewhere over the desert (43-44); in Pullman's revelation of the moment the idea of *The Scarecrow and his Servant* occurred while watching a performance of *Candide* at the National Theatre in London (115-118); in E. L. Doctorow's "vision of what this street looked like in 1906" which led to *Ragtime* (qtd. in McCormack loc. 1469, 1516; kindle ed.). And this goes back to Turgenieff, too, when he says

of those germs of ideas that "they accumulate, and we are always picking them over, selecting among them. They are the breath of life by which I mean that life, in its own way, breathes them upon us" (qtd. in James 43).

An internal unity, which the *telos* of story demands but is logically impossible because it is being always divided by time, is paradoxically made possible by that curious observation triggering a writer's prelibation because it distorts time. It feels to me as though that 'curious observation' is an attempt at bridge-building between the unconscious and the conscious, like a seed being dropped, searching for illumination and nourishment; some suggestion that something lies buried that the world needs to see, a sense of the "salivancies it generates" fully contained within (McCormack loc. 2136; kindle ed.). That is, a full taste is still to come and raising that full taste to the surface is the job of the writer and part of the role of story in that writer's job.

The Action of Exploring the Inquiry

T.I.: "Rising Tension" is a paper of yours described as a "Late chapter of … *Poetic Licence*[5]" (71), but it no longer appears in the novel. What happened?

A.L.: Actually, the basis of it could well have served in the design of this exegesis, but my author decided – for reasons known only to him – to replace the curriculum committee from that paper with you. I think that was a questionable decision because, for a start, imagine how much more rigorous the questions would have been? But also "Rising Tension" was, in many ways, formative to this inquiry. Be that as it may, one of its central arguments is that creative writing's relationship with English is problematic, a topic David

[5] The novel originally carried the working title 'The Balsamic Jihad', so the original paper refers to this title, not *Poetic Licence.*

Morley raised in a lecture at Murdoch University in 2013. He claimed creative writing needs a divorce from English (Payne) and in a later email, confirmed that he still believed in what he said in Perth ("A research question ..."; personal email). Morley argues for the opening up of interdisciplinary relationships with the sciences and remaking parts of our curriculum to reflect how the crafts of science and writing can be acquired, both of which, he says, “require technique, perception and imagination” ("Serious play" 166). This argument is wholly in line with the Australian Government’s commitment to general capabilities and cross curricular priorities in high school education (ACARA). “Rising Tension” raises a clear argument for establishing creative writing as a discipline separate to English so that it can better engage in creative learning, achieve educational outcomes that share values and experiences that creative writing and science have in common, and contribute in particular to STEAM (Science Technology Engineering Arts Maths) education, which is demanded of the creative economy and a national pursuit for innovation (see Madden et al. "Rethinking STEAM Education").

T.I.: But Nick Everett argues for sound “academic and pedagogical reasons for developing creative writing *in* English” ("Creative Writing and English" 232). What do you say to that?

A.L.: Him among many, I imagine. But, really, I think trying to teach students creative writing from an English classroom is a bit of a worry; they are different disciplines resting on entirely different epistemologies and, therefore, creative writing demands a different pedagogical approach. Although, notwithstanding the fact that writers are not responsible for making literature – literature is decided upon by readers of a particular type and “If they decide that you are literature, then it seems that you are” (Eagleton, Literary Theory 8) – I do recognise in “Rising Tension” that the relationship between creative writing and English is an important one. But the theories of knowledge in creative writing apply to

acts and practices in creative work and the development of a capacity to inscribe the thinking manifested by those activities: making the thinking comprehensible. The imaginative agent in creative writing is the writer attempting to inscribe mental images as verbal artefacts that may then go on to become part of something larger, which may in fact be accessed through English (or any other language for that matter) and indeed might one day become literature. On the other hand, English as a discipline of study, is invested in responsiveness, where the imaginative agent is the reader responding to verbal images set before them. Creative writing must deal with the formation of new ideas, with 'preliberative' acts prior to engaging the imagination, and building new knowledge from sensations of experience.

I introduce this epistemological difference in "Rising Tension" by discussing how we understand 'premise', arguing that the writer (of a story) needs to access a premise for a story in the making "if not at the very outset, then very soon after, [while] the reader doesn't discover it until the end" (72-73). This justifies examining creative writing as a practice that pushes back against the limitations of literary, critical, and analytical theory as a basis for understanding that a text is always in the making for the creative writer; it is never really finished. In English, however, as in Literature, the text is extant, the imaginative agent is the reader, and the way a writer deals with a subject, trumps the subject itself. The reader is seeking mastery of the written language, whereas the creative writer is seeking mastery of making arrested thought comprehensible. Obviously, good writing skills should make meaning clear to readers, but not necessarily, as Wahlstrom says in *The Tao of Writing*, at the expense of subverting thought to following the rules instead of pursuing self-expression, discovery, and developing a sense of critical thought while doing those things (8-9).

T.I.: In *Poetic Licence*, you say you "don't teach creative writing from a career forged in academia" (15 [39]). How does "Rising Tension" help locate creative writing as a practice and a teaching model examined from within it?

A.L: It is impossible in an inquiry like this to cover the whole field of creative writing. The title and introduction of *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research and Pedagogy* (Harper and Kroll) is indicative of how the field has three distinct schemata: 'study', 'practice', and 'teaching'. Many people who teach creative writing come from conducting a study in the field, such as this one, others come from long-term practice; some who conduct studies do so to improve their practice, others to improve their teaching. The relationship between the three schemata is dynamic, with study informing teaching, teaching informing practice and practice informing study. This inquiry is primarily situated in practice, but it is a study conducted through an experiment in practice invoking the performance of a teacher, and an argument that practice demonstrates how 'story is the pursuit' of the creative writer and how its emergence should be taught. "Rising Tension" positions story as a "representative of creative writing" arguing for creative writing to be taught in high schools against a structural hegemony of English and its disciplinary association with Media, Culture, Literature and Literary theory, (73) compared to which, *C*reative *W*riting does not independently enjoy a similar academic standing.

T.I.: I know it is argued in some of the literature that we learn to write by reading. Is that a position you subscribe to?

A.L.: One thing to keep in mind is that "writing is nearly always born in the act of writing" (Wahlstrom 6). However, I know among theorists who argue that we learn to write from reading (see Dawson *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* 90-91) that there is a belief such as that put forward by Ian Reid in an email conversation with my author over the issues raised in "Rising Tension". Reid argues that literary study in the form of "wide and deep reading" is the basis of the critical and creative coming together productively, "otherwise hopeful writers will have read too little to understand that their main challenge is not to express themselves but to master the medium of the written language" ("Email

conversation"). There are two problems with this: one, it is a position that assumes imagination is the starting point and ignores the value of prelibation; the other that creative writing is seen (and thereby assessed) only and always as that which is written (see Price "The writing teacher"). Moreover, it is the reader who is in search of mastery of the written language, seeking meaning and understanding from analysis and criticism; the writer is in search of arresting thinking and making it comprehensible, and this can be achieved through visual literacies as much as it can through verbal literacy. While I agree that wide and deep reading is instrumental in developing a student's sensibilities, Reid's position is a little bit like saying one learns to blow the saxophone by listening to Charlie Parker. An existing student, already learning, with some skills in place, can improve their playing by listening to Charlie Parker, but their preliberative skills need a different approach.

So, I do, therefore, reject the idea that we learn to write through reading. But I agree with Stephen King when he says, "If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot" (145). Perhaps he should have written "write a lot and read a lot", but reading will improve writing, thinking, and imagination – especially reading with a focus on techniques writers use to achieve certain effects (see Cane *Write Like The Masters*). In *Becoming a Novelist,* John Gardner makes no bones of the fact that, in the eighteenth-century, imitation was how writers learned their skill (26), so it stands to reason that if a writer is to reach their potential, they need to "learn to absorb from other writers by using the technique of imitation" (Cane 3). Francine Prose phrased it in *Reading like a Writer* as learning "to write by writing and, by example, by reading books" (2). Reading well for technique is part of writing well, and it shows when a writer has taken time to understand how to generate an effect wanted by taking apart the sentences, examining the words and the punctuation, feeling for the sounds of syllables, and interrogating images and metaphors buried in the text by a writer who does it well.

This reading skill is quite different to reading as critical literacy though, the goal of which is to teach students to become better readers of all types of texts. Melrose mounts an important argument for this in “Reading and Righting” where he points out that “better readers – become better thinkers – become better writers – become better readers” (112). I find that when critical literacy is combined with creative writing in the classroom, it has an unusual liberating effect on students because it enables a voice, but also instructs them on how to find and exercise that voice. This plays a crucial role in a “critically creative and creatively critical” consciousness (110), drawing important connections between language and society, placing students in a stronger position to negotiate social futures.

Emergence of Story

T.I.: As I understand your argument: creative writing is a practice engaged in the making of a novel; story is the experience integral to understanding the novel; and, if we are to teach creative writing effectively, we need to understand the creative practice that shapes story, and in turn, how story shapes the creative practice. Can we relate this to how the story of *Poetic Licence* emerged?

A.L: My author had recently written a screenplay called “The Soup Kitchen” in which Hunter was the central character, and he wrote, “The reader and writer share the experience that a homeless person is powerless in a world of corruption, but corruption must ultimately feed upon itself, and homelessness must ultimately become home” ("Notebook: Early notes, PL"). This turned his attention towards the issue of asylum and the idea that politicians were prepared to dismiss the human horror and exploit the desperation refugees suffer for a privileged experience of gain. In *Poetic Licence*, Hunter acknowledges the similarity of homelessness with asylum seeking after hearing Falullah’s story (46, 49 [70, 73]), but he verbalises the parallels when he is talking to Lavender Jensen at St Patrick’s Day Centre and says, “‘… a homeless person is not just left out in the cold, they’re running away from what

they can't go back to'" (130 [154]). *Poetic Licence* emerged against a background of questioning why such circumstances have been allowed to develop and, throughout this, my author is seeking some wisdom around the problem of isolation and how power works through its imposition. One could say that *Poetic Licence* was born out of a deep recognition of the problems of isolation and disempowerment, but only comes into being when the bounds of that trap are broken.

T.I.: The novel's timeline is organised against a countdown to the 2013 Australian federal election. How important was that in thinking about the story?

A.L.: The country was preparing for an election and the rhetoric of the opposing parties found common ground in creating an enemy out of refugees coming to Australia on boats from Indonesia (see Surma 8+), so it became a contest of who might better define the 'national interest' through 'boat arrivals'. The curious observation that triggered *Poetic Licence* was a question of: Who profits from boats on the water? The answer: The political party that best identifies the people-smuggler as the enemy – those who are the cause of deaths at sea, those to whom profits flow because of weak border-protection policies. The master prelibation at that initial stage was a sensation filtered through the everyman's powerlessness against a possibility of election manipulation that made sure the enemy was large enough and real enough to engage with. And it is worthwhile to note that elections are also stories, each party represents the protagonist in its own version and concocting an ideal antagonist is essential to telling the story. In Australia, electoral antagonism exists between the two major parties, but that, in itself, is not enough. If it can be shown there is a bigger antagonist to worry about and the opposing party is impotent in the face of that new and emerging antagonism, then the hero is self-selected. Christian Salmon sums it up rather nicely. Storytelling in a political arena, he says "tacks artificial narratives on to reality, blocks exchanges, and saturates symbolic space with its series and stories.… [It] establishes

narrative systems that lead individuals to identify with models and to conform to protocols" (10).

T.I.: And this is what Sam Codlin explains to be sold to the voters as a "'Self-defence and rescue story.… We will protect the borders, stop the boats, and save lives at sea'" (73 [97])?

A.L.: Indeed. The plausibility of this proposition, abhorrent though it was, arose out of a re-emerged Moral Re-armament ideology (Campbell and Howard) meeting with a long held paranoia of an invasion by northern hordes, and this produced an opportunity to imitate what can happen behind the scenes to change the course of a political contest and therefore "produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind" (Dr Johnson qtd. in Wood 180). So, the master prelibation was a sensation filtered through the everyman's powerlessness against electoral manipulation that made sure the enemy was large enough and real enough to engage with. And this is a consistent characteristic of the novel: that it touches the fears and hopes of ordinary people living in contemporary Australia.

T.I.: It sounds like quite a lot of research might have been required to bring this about, what were the initial steps and how were they managed?

A.L.: To write a novel is an endeavour that asks of the writer a substantial investment in the development of the idea; to establish continuity of interest until the story finds its ending (James 5). I think what is demonstrated in the way *Poetic Licence* came together is just how critical it is to know what story is being told: the motivations of the main characters, the master prelibation and the final object at the outset. This might sound as though it flies in the face of what I said earlier about the creative writer's work as never being finished, but when you think about it, it's a logical extension of the pursuit of the effects that become story

in the mind of the respondent. Knowing what the master effect wanted is to be, is knowing the story – but not necessarily knowing how it will come together or how the effect will be achieved. This is why, if we think of story as the pursuit of the creative writer, knowing the story that is to be told at the outset helps the emergent experience of its making, because the emergent experience leads to the self-organising entity that becomes story in the mind of the respondent.

Fredrick Forsyth talks about how he experiences the writing act as “thinking of the story, researching the facts as far as they can be ascertained, and then the writing” ("Novelist Forsyth" 2:54-3:05). For him, writing is already post composing, it is a matter only of inscribing what is already in mind: the story has already been formed out of the effects his inscription of actors, events, and objects will generate. In *The Art of Writing Fiction*, Orvis says one of the places where writers tend to fall down is in a failure to mull over the story and live it daily for a long time (29-30). There are different ideas on this too. Amanda Boulter argues in W*riting Fiction* that story emerges as the product of “the people, setting, and possible events” from imagining the fictional world growing “slowly in our mind’s eye” (11). She later suggests that the true shape of the story doesn’t occur until “scenes and sentences are cut, changed and re-shaped” in a stage she identifies as ‘rewriting’ (12).

Once again, we have a problem of understanding precisely what is being discussed when the term ‘story’ is the subject. I concede that changes are made in all revision, but not, as I understand it, to the story – that remains intact from conceit to conclusion. If we are talking about the “shape” of the story, I would argue we are talking about plot, “the purposeful arrangement of experience” (Belknap 4), not story, “the narrative of consequential events” (Frey, *Damn Good Novel* 72). From another perspective, E. L. Doctorow in an interview with *The Paris Review* says nothing in his work is ever calculated.

> The inventions of the book come as discoveries. At a certain point, of course, you figure out what your premises are and what you're doing. But certainly, with the beginnings of the work, you really don't know what's going to happen. (Plimpton "E. L. Doctorow")

McCormack picks up on this interview in *The Editor, The Novel and The Novelist* and wonders whether Doctorow would accept the following paraphrasing of his comment:

> At a certain point you figure out what your objective is – that is, what overall cerebral and emotional impact you want the book to have on the reader. This awareness allows the articulation of master-effect-wanted (sic), which in turn helps to guide one step after another as you proceed to write. (loc. 1537; kindle ed.)

He goes on to concede that discovery made in the act of writing opens the way to "character, circuitry, and setting", but he also advocates for spending more time on arriving at a master effect wanted earlier rather than waiting until the writing is done to discover it. In "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't", Seymour Chatman argues that a story can be transposed between different media, can be rearranged in its order of telling, but remains the same story because of its deep structure (122). This reinforces the point that having the story in mind and knowing its constituent parts well before writing is part of the critical practice behind writing.

Writing in Practice

T.I.: Are you discussing, here, a phase of 'prewriting', with 'writing' and 'rewriting' to follow that?

A.L.: 'Prewriting, writing, and rewriting' is a kind of 'three-act structure of the writer' identified by J. R. Hayes and L. S. Flower in 1980 and corresponds to "planning ideas, translating ideas into text, and reviewing ideas and text" (Kellogg, "Professional Writing Expertise" 390). Although Kellogg points out (as does Amanda Boulter) that "these are not

linear phases … each process can be and often is invoked throughout all phases of text development, from prewriting to a final draft" (390) and can be going on simultaneously, the insistence that writing is procedural and its product somehow linked to phases or stages of development is a worry to my ear. The contradiction in Kellogg's argument lies in the assertion that it is a process, but it isn't linear. To say a practice is a process is to argue for it going on as a series of actions (that is, actions arranged in sequence) which are performed in a definite and predetermined manner expecting to lead to a conventional outcome (OED "process, n."). In other words, the process is arguing that first, do this; then, do this; next, this … and so on. Yet, there is the suggestion that one can be 'prewriting' while 'writing'; 'rewriting' while 'prewriting', which is much more aligned with the self-organising principles of artistic creativity in which the writer experiences coincidence: either some *thing* is 'near' another, that is, it is contiguous; or some *thing* is 'like' another. The *thing* being referenced here is mainly an experience, either an experience of an object, place or person, or an experience of a happening (Alexander 48). The experience of 'thinking something up' while 'writing another thing down' (prewriting while writing) is one of "stochastic resonance" (49) and, therefore, non-linear, which places it outside of the realm of process.

The roots of this 'three act structure' appear to lie in a teaching method for writing, whereby the teacher can instruct pupils to carry out a given set of tasks related to the planning of what to write, and then another set of tasks converting that planned material into a version of the written, and then revising that as a subsequent version. It is a model that provides a teacher, especially a teacher who is not themselves writing, a workable assessment framework because, in each case, there is a version of the written to be assessed as writing, and this represents, in a conventional sense, a clear pathway towards what can be said to be achievement. In his *New Writing* article, "The writing teacher", my author argues for a refocus in assessing creative writing away from the 'written' and the practice of "holding the

end product up as evidence of writing having taken place" and, instead, advocates for "using an assessment framework that gets below the surface and looks deeper at the way story functions, at how we understand the effect-wanted (sic) that generates an idea, at how the curious observation triggers a unique experience" (Price sub. A Need for Review). This, he says, will lead to knowing writing better both by teachers and students and offer richer transformative learning experiences.

T.I.: What do you make of Morley's argument in *Introduction to Creative Writing* that a stage of prewriting "is essential to create believable characters … [allowing] you to get inside them" (167)?

A.L.: I believe that one begins with a discovery of character because story is always about 'someone'. Doctorow talks about facing the wall of his study and in desperation starting to write about that wall, then the house attached to the wall, which was built in 1906, and then thinking about what the street looked like at that time, which is the emergence of his curious observation. But it doesn't take him long for the thinking and the writing to reach people and the white clothes they wore to keep cool in summer (Plimpton "E. L. Doctorow"). Character soon follows because someone must do something, or want something, for any interest to continue. Stephen King says, for him, "the situation comes first. The characters – always flat and unfeatured, to begin with – come next" (164). A situation occurs in the relationship between a character and the circumstances in which they find themselves, so some aspect of character must be known if the writing is of 'the situation'. In all his books, Frey recommends beginning by creating characters. "Characters", he says, "are the *stuff* out of which a novel is constructed" (*Damn Good Novel* 1; emphasis in original). But, as I said, I don't see that as a separate action from writing, it is still a practice of thinking, and making that thinking comprehensible.

The thriller is driven by two characters: the protagonist pursuing some object; and the antagonist seeking to prevent the protagonist attaining the object (see Frey *How to Write a Damn Good Thriller)*. The story, through its master prelibation, will have directed who these characters are, at least in terms of who wants what and why. A lot of the discussion around methods like the 'three-act' model we discussed earlier, the idea that we are in one or another of these three phases, are the antithesis of what it is to be a writer because, as Wahlstrom says in *The Tao of Writing*, such practices "impose structure on ideas and force topics into structure" (6). What we want to do, however, is explore the possibilities of where the events of a story might take us, and to do that, we need to take time to explore the spaces between the structures, which might include fleshing out details of the characters as the events unfold.

If the story has been thought of, a master prelibation driving the work holds for the entire making of the work, like the piece of clay a sculptor is working with; and the writing, whether it is walking the streets of Fremantle, or building tension through the dialogue between Roger Lamord and me in Balsamic & Olives, or revising the order of events because something has come up … it is all part of the same action: that of moulding the idea, of seeking to satisfy the master effect wanted. There is no benefit in separating out 'stages' or 'phases' through which one passes, or mechanics of performing one type of action as separate to another: the whole thing, from the curious observation through to handing over the manuscript is writing, regardless that every writer will exercise a different methodology.

T.I.: Does that mean you don't advocate planning?

A.L.: When novelists and short story writers are under discussion, there is a tendency to split them into two camps, as if they are what Morley describes in *Introduction to Creative Writing,* "twins divided at birth" (127). In the one camp are those whose work is an experience of discovery in which events and characters emerge as the work unfolds. Writers of this type were labelled "pansters" at National Novel Writing Month (Fight or Flight) based

on the idea that they fly by the seat of their pants when writing. The other camp has writers whose plans detail every event and action. But *Poetic Licence* fits neither of these, it was much more organic.

My author's text, *Story Craft*, details "A Story Planning Process" used in his Born Storytellers teaching programs (Price 164-165), and some of that is relevant, but his experience with this novel has transformed some of his views on the efficacy of that. Early work included sketching out motives, methodologies, evaluations, and purposes for both myself and Roger Lamord (Phillips and Huntley 63), along with tri-dimensional biographies (Egri 37) so a clear understanding of where oppositions lie can be drawn early. Hunter's character already existed, but work was also done on Kelly Boulter and Falullah Salim in those early stages, and there are sketch notes on casting the circuitry of these and other characters impacting the driver characters. Just on that point, it is important when writing characters who are based on cultures and genders other than those the writer identifies with to spend time with people who can talk to those differences, and that means spending more time working up the profiles of those characters. Issues of cultural appropriation can often get in the way of dramatic casting, and my author was conscious of this in casting the roles of the characters in *Poetic Licence*. For example, in "the concrete thought of the set up" (Price, "Notebook: Early notes, PL"), after spending time with a homeless person, he wrote on the issue of homelessness to bring that into the situation, although in the early notes the homeless person hadn't been identified as Hunter – the opportunity to recast him in the role came later.

There was some initial planning in setting out a step sheet of possible events in the story, a technique Frey advocates as a device to "keep events in a progressive cause-and-effect order … and to chart the growth and development of characters" (*Damn Good Novel* 84). We could call this a plan of sorts, a way of establishing an internal logic of the story to make sure it has an organic unity, but aspects of 'writing-as-discovery' altered or, in some

cases, discarded the plan. The story world and key locations were geographically mapped (PL 2-3 [26-27]), which aids in understanding the physical dimensions of the fictive world. But much cannot be done in early planning, because characters grow and we do not really understand what they grow into until the full range of their dimensions and what they will do to act in "maximum capacity" is tested by their circumstances and forces of antagonism (Frey, *Damn Good Novel* 23). Maureen Freely recognises these limitations to setting out detailed plans and encourages her students to think before they write (26). Lorraine M. Lopez counsels against over-investing time and energy into planning, which can risk diminishing the flash of inspiration by discussing ideas too often. (12). While there is a danger in over-planning what the writing is to be, there is also a danger in not thinking deeply enough about it before starting. I have seen students put so much energy into a plan that when they get to writing the narrative itself, the energy has been consumed, but, on the other hand, I have seen students (and other writers privately admit to this too) start writing without forethought only to find they are at sea in a boat without a rudder.

There's a balance and everyone must find their own way. Moreover, the teaching of writing must include opportunities for students to learn and experiment with the techniques of both approaches so that they can incorporate those that suit their cognitive style, and/or are right for a given project. One of my author's early decisions was in search of voice and his initial writing imitated directly the opening passage of John le Carré's *A Most Wanted Man*, substituting the "Turkish heavyweight boxing champion sauntering down a Hamburg Street" (1) for "A homeless man shuffling along a Fremantle street" (PL "First draft", 1). This passage is no longer in the novel, but it served effectively to establish a style for Hunter's character and set the tone as a political thriller, pointing also to how reading like a writer, or writing in imitation, can lead to the voice.

T.I.: The police procedural aspects of the story are very detailed and graphic. How was this research conducted?

A.L.: I'd have to say it helps to know a copper or two, but my author relied mainly on observation of policing behaviours and attitudes, discussions with trainers, lectures by forensics and firearms experts, along with published materials about policing practices, and then fictionalised it. I have no doubt he would come in for some criticism from actual police officers and detectives in the field, but part of the fun of fiction is being able to create a world which the reader can inhabit as though it does exist. Such verisimilitude frequently arises from the language, which in this instance came from the Western Australian Police website's list of terminology and acronyms in common use by police officers (Police). This website at the time also included much of the history of the WA Police Service (as it was known then), including ranks and insignias, and general station management structures. Much of the forensics procedures came from the *Biology Methods Manual*, published by the Metropolitan Police Forensic Science Laboratory (Metropolitan Police Forensic Science), and Michael O'Connor's excellent paper, "Perceptions of the Criminal Justice System in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia" (O'Connor) provided background on policing in Kalgoorlie. Other than that, media reports on policing in Fremantle and accounts given by offenders in court, along with some historical personal experience, proved helpful in establishing attitudes towards police.

T.I.: I have to know: how was the genre decided on? And why?

A.L.: Finding a theory is important to this work because it frames a theoretical argument about the role of story in its making. Among the early theoretical notes is some writing around the idea of the story as a political thriller.

> … a kind of detective story, but one based more on suspense than surprise. We see the crime committed and are aware of the villain's identity; we don't know whether the detective will find the culprit within the time or options available. (Price, "Notebook: Early notes, PL")

The notes refer to Booker's discussion in *The Seven Basic Plots* on "The History of Susannah" and "Bel and the Dragon" (506), ancient stories that exhibit what has become more the structure of the thriller than the modern day detective mystery. The modern detective mystery often features a central character who is curiously detached, and displays a lack of real human involvement with other characters (512). In developing the circuitry of character archetypes for *Poetic licence*, my author was conscious of avoiding this kind of detachment. One other critical piece of early writing was "the crime", which explores how the murder that triggered all subsequent events was carried out, who did it and who was behind it (Price "Notebook: Early notes, PL"). While the basics of the crime in terms of its location and the firewalls protecting the perpetrators were consistent with the one in the novel, the initial writing around it included characters who were subsequently replaced by those in the novel, and actions that did not carry though into the novel. This is one example of the kind of writing John Gardner refers to as necessary parts of larger forms that can become the trigger of a larger work (*The Art of Fiction* 35).

The genre as thriller was decided on right at the outset, quite specifically because the thriller contains two forces for change: the antagonist wants to transform society into a model that suits his/her desires, and the protagonist wants to bring about change that restores order. As Frey says in *Damn Good Thriller*, "The villain is your best friend because the villain creates the plot behind the plot" (41), and that secondary plot is a device to impress a sense of change on the world. The tension between these two forces for change is the source of energy behind all action in the thriller and, for my author, it reveals a model from which to examine

the transformative effects of story. It was a later decision to incorporate aspects of the academic novel into it, making it somewhat hybrid in nature.

Day Three | Evaluation

Lazaar discusses the impact evaluation methods have on how we measure progress at a personal level, reflecting on how the transformative effect of story owes, at least in part, its understanding to what and how we measure.

The Thriller as Model

T.I.: How do you think the relationship between the novel and the exegesis is explored here?

A.L.: To begin with, *Poetic Licence* is an academic/thriller novel which, mainly through the unusual circumstances of its making, is not like a normal novel (Krauth "The Novel and the Academic Novel", 13). It is hybrid in nature and built around the need to satisfy academic requirements of a creative thesis and the balancing act that comes from being one part of a conjoined pair. I have to say there is a bit of a worry here, not least of which is the challenge of making a hybrid feel whole. The debate in a creative writing research project about whether the novel takes precedence over the exegesis or vice versa, and exactly how that relationship is managed by candidate, supervisors, and examiners has raged since the birth of the creative writing doctorate and continues to rage. As Daniel Southward points out, “neither theorists nor creative writers are able to agree on the relationship between the critical and the creative” (274).

One of the primary goals often stated for the academic novel is that it either contributes to – or is seen as research into – new knowledge. Novels are always investigative, that is their nature. They involve research of their subject matter (what we writers often refer to as situational research), and quite often research into a method of making to produce a degree of new knowledge (Harper, "Creative Writing to the Future" 429; Krauth 13). The contribution of knowledge must be to the field, so the question then becomes: how do we

know *Poetic Licence,* in its research or its method of making, contributes to knowledge in creative writing study, practice or teaching? I would argue that the making of a novel within academic constraints blurs between genres in order to find a critical voice within its creative capacity, which has to be, as Clifford Geertz says, "more than just a matter of Harry Houdini or Richard Nixon turning up as characters in novels" (19). So, there are several aspects to both the research and the making that impact the way knowledge comes about and when we sense its manifestation. The making of a novel is a 'practice' of creative writing, coming about in this case while undertaking a 'study' of creative writing. On top of that the novel includes characters arguing for aspects of 'teaching and learning' creative writing within it. And now we have, at the same time, me justifying the creative work in this exegesis. This brings all three schemata of the field together in a multilayered experience, and that alone affects the orderliness of the work as a whole.

T.I.: Your author describes *Poetic Licence* as a political thriller. What makes it so?

A.L: The short answer: politics and suspense. By its nature, though, a political thriller novel can't be a representation of life as it is, because the situation needs to have impossible dimensions. But it can suggest a truth about how certain events came about and fictionalise the narrative elements that suit the premise of the story. Politics is about power, and, in the thriller, it is about misdirection because through misdirection power accumulates to those who acquire it or maintain it, usually by criminal or quasi-criminal means. It's also about violence. Political differences give birth to the most extreme cases of violence, and histories, of both the West and the East, are replete with acts of violence that have overturned nations. We have to accept that "violence and corruption are part and parcel of society as a whole, and in which the police themselves are infected by such forces" (Messent loc. 2880), which raises a certain irony: that the people charged with preventing us being affected by criminal behaviour themselves act in criminal ways.

The political thriller's story world is out of balance, and the person trying to bring it back to balance is to some extent ocnophil[6] to begin with, which, in the case of *Poetic Licence*, is another irony because it stems from "part of the professionalism" (Palmer 80) that comes from my role as a teacher and therefore, to some extent, risk averse. At the same time, it means I recognise the impossibility of the task before me and, not being fully equipped for it, must take risks to complete it. Where a thriller gets a lot of its energy is from how it establishes, through degrees of verisimilitude, a convincingly impossible version of reality, but that "is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility" (Wood 179). The thriller reader has a fascination with crime and criminals and the intellectual battles of wills between how one intends to get away with it and how the other foils it. Thriller readers want to see how well the villain's plans to get away with their crimes work, and what a much weaker protagonist could possibly bring to the contest that leads to the villain's downfall. Much of the thriller's appeal derives from its ludic nature, prompting Dorothy Sayers to remark: "it is remarkable how strong is the fascination of the higher type of detective-story for the intellectual-minded, among writers as well as readers" (Marcus 261).

If you think of *Poetic Licence* in those terms, you can see that an ordinary, everyday university teacher is no match for the might and power of the richest man in the state, a master manipulator, who is also the head of the state branch of a political party hell-bent on winning an election, and prepared to do whatever it takes, whatever is in his power, to achieve that. In my position, this is a bleak outlook, and with the political shift towards the

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6 An ocnophil is a person who seeks to avoid dangerous or unfamiliar situations, relying on external objects and (especially) other people for security, and tending to clutch or hold on to them when threatened (OED "ochnophil n. [and adj.]")

right and capitalist conservatism worldwide, it appears not to get any better. The structure of *Poetic Licence* is somewhat disruptive, which makes it unpredictable to some degree, adding to the heightened drama and suspense as the story unfolds. Being suspended from my teaching duties when I was in hospital, already out of action is one such instance (323 [347]); being grabbed by unknown attackers outside Balsamic & Olives is another (270 [294]). The unpredictable nature of these twists, along with the half-known facts that I spend a lot of energy tracking down and cause me to take wrong turns, give the reader a need for explanation and the thrill emerges from anticipation of how the drama will provide it.

T.I.: How do you respond to the notion that the thriller has also emerged with significant genre hybridisation (Lynch 3), and does that challenge genre identification by specific and fixed characteristics?

A.L.: First of all, genre is a sociolinguistic reference system for categorising literature and other works of art based on style or form or what is commonly discussed as ‘conventions’ – common practices similar within a range of works. The sociological aspect of this helps those interested in a specific form or style to exclude discussions from quarters that do not share that interest. So, libraries shelve books in a way that caters to an understanding of interests, enabling those who seek out that interest an ease of access without having to expose themselves to conventions that might hold alternative values. By maximising differentiation, booksellers, music companies, and motion picture makers, for example, foster market concentration based on cultural interests, erecting barriers to thinking more broadly about our literary culture.

Being very specific about genre is one of the demands Hollywood places on writers if their screenplays are to be considered. In view of this, it is curious to note Steve Neale’s identification of three broad categories of crime genre in Hollywood movies as detective,

gangster, and the suspense thriller, the differences being mostly where the emphasis is placed:

> The first with its focus on an agent of investigation and its emphasis on detection, the second with its focus on the perpetrators of crime and its emphasis on criminal activity, and the third with its focus on the victims of crime and its emphasis on their response. (*Genre and Hollywood* 85)

One of the characteristics that makes *Poetic Licence* unique, is that it does feature aspects of all three. Even though my mission is to safeguard Falullah, in order to do that I need to ensure her brother's murderers are out of play otherwise she is "'at serious risk of suffering the same fate by the same hands'" (177 [201]), so there is an emphasis on detection. But the closer I get to that solution, the more I learn of secretive and powerful forces corrupting an investigation, producing an emphasis on criminal activity. And, finally, safeguarding a victim of people trafficking under threat for her life is an emphasis on the victim. In-between is the effort to discover who exactly is behind this and the corruption of institutions that emerges.

T.I.: According to Frey, the International Thriller Writers' website says: "The thriller is a genre of fiction in which tough, resourceful, but essentially ordinary heroes are pitted against villains determined to destroy them, their country, or the stability of the free world" (qtd. in *Damn Good Thriller* xii). Does *Poetic Licence* meet these criteria?

A.L.: While Frey argues that "heroes should never be ordinary", he points out that the main ingredient is "pulse-pounding suspense" (xii) and it is the type of terrible trouble confronting the protagonist that determines its subgenre: that is, whether it is crime, political, adventure, and so on. Frey distinguishes between use of the term 'thriller' in the United States and in Great Britain. In the latter, he says, 'thriller' is often used to describe the genre of any suspense fiction, including the detective novel, which in the United States is not

considered a thriller, but a mystery. I would argue that *Poetic Licence* challenges ideas of formula because it blends genres and inverts common tropes.

In many ways, *Poetic Licence* is a quest in which I form a band of supporters around me, borrowing from adventure and even romance to a degree to round out the way my author sees society (Booker ch. 4). In a typical thriller, the hero goes it alone, is sexually potent, and must resurrect himself from a near-death experience to complete the mission. This 'superhero' aspect is what gave rise to considerable disdain when the thriller made its debut, but I am no superhero: in fact, I am the antithesis of the common thriller hero, which might seem something of a worry but it does have its humorous side. Detective fiction, according to David Glover, became "serious business" in the early 20th century, and stories based on "logical analysis" needed to be distinguished from vulgar "crude and pungent sensationalism" ("The Thriller" 136), a perception of what the thriller featured. My author wanted to avoid the crassness that can sometimes be associated with the 'hard-boiled' and have his novel taken seriously as a comment on a politically corrupt society rather than simply a chase and take-down. The distinction, Glover says, lies not in the way a crime is solved, but "the way in which it persistently seeks to raise the stakes of the narrative, heightening or exaggerating the experience of events by transforming them into a rising curve of danger, violence or shock" (137).

T.I.: What about suspense? There's a moment in *Poetic Licence* where you are discussing this with your student, Ricard Koffi, and you say "suspense is a reader's experience" (87 [111]). How does a writer know they are developing this experience?

A.L.: I'm not sure you ever know, but well-executed techniques of foreshadowing and raising story questions that threaten a character's stability lays the groundwork. The issue of suspense that Frey raises in *Damn Good Thriller* is important for understanding how thrillers convey an intensity of experience through violence, suppression of rage, psychopathic

behaviours, the application of persecution and torture (xii). There is a palpable presence of narrated danger in *Poetic Licence* introduced early at a fairly low level with the veiled threat to my position by Donna Gardner (13 [37]), but it then receives a sharp jump when Hunter confronts a thug in a car park (33 [57]). And, when I meet with Hunter and our exchange includes: "'There's murder involved. He's dropped his voice to a whisper, but that's a word I hear loud and clear. It's like the smell of a fix to a junkie'" (62 [86]). These instances each foreshadow danger and evoke impressions of a dark and mysterious world emerging from different evolving conflicts, but they fit into Egri's model of how emerging conflict is "foreshadowed first by determined forces lined up against each other" (135).

Experiences like these raise what are known as 'story questions' in the mind of the reader, leading them to harbour less interest in the identity of the criminals than in how they intend to get away with the criminal activity, how the protagonist intends to bring them to justice or, indeed, whether they will be brought to justice at all, because in many cases, it doesn't matter how much police work is involved, the dynamics of how power functions means that the dysfunction of institutional corruption continues (David Simon interviewed in Abrams 25). Another common feature that amplifies suspense in the thriller is the perceived David and Goliath relationship of the protagonist to the antagonist. The antagonist in the thriller is often on an international or state-actor scale, with enormous resources applied to intensely corrupt activities, and an attitude that, on the one hand the law doesn't matter, and on the other that they will do whatever is necessary to get what they want.

At one level, I find I'm up against institutional bullying; at another, a corporate megalomaniac with a serious political agenda; and yet another, some very violent thugs with "the latest manual on water torture" (302 [326]). Against this, at all levels, I am woefully under-resourced, am denied many of the facts, and it appears that any justice I am intent on

getting for Falullah, myself, my community – or humankind in general – is a dim glow gradually fading in the distance.

T.I.: What does it feel like when you're in the thick of it?

A.L.: Truth is, I am wanting a quiet settled life where I can dream about unfulfilled sexual potency, pursue poetic interests, rest on the laurels of a poetic licence – but despite that, I get involved in something I don't want to be involved in because I have a duty to protect vulnerable people. The thriller has to have vulnerable people to create what Philip Simpson suggests, as a basic principle of suspense, "the heightened audience anxiety created when the protagonist is fighting a contest against what looks like overwhelming odds" ("Noir and the Psycho Thriller" loc. 3053). You see, you don't pick a fight like that unless there is something worth fighting for. So, while the reader enjoys the experience of the chase, the intoxication of mind games, near-death experiences, threats, and explicit violence (Rzepka loc. 213) – and that provides the psychological foundation upon which the thriller is built – I am frightened of that. But my duty to protect the vulnerable outweighs the fears and goes with being a professional teacher, it is part of the job description to some extent, but it is also an aspect of the poetic licence from which I can't escape. Of course Hunter knows this, and his insistence I put my poetic licence to work (62 [86]) is the first inkling the reader gets of the crucible that binds me to the events. It is the reader's first real opportunity to grow sympathetic and, as events unfold, this becomes a "fictive dream" (Bell; Frey *Damn Good Mystery*, *Damn Good Novel (vol 2)* and *The Key*; John Gardner *The Art of Fiction*). The reader identifies with my reactions to the stress generated by extreme and far-fetched situations in which I find myself, even though, to some degree, the conspiracies are convincing under the circumstances.

We learn from Jerry Palmer in *Thrillers* that conspiracy is essential to the thriller, and the conspiracy makes the world opaque and uncertain because the conspirators "hide behind

disguises; things are not what they seem" (85). In the political sphere, this is even more opaque because wealth and power create vaults of secrecy that are impenetrable for the everyman (again, an implication of the title of this exegesis *The Refuge of Truth in the Political Thriller*), and this enables the growth of false values and makes it "possible for those guided by *what I want* or by *what is wrong* to live undisturbed and rise to positions of key responsibility in the nation" (Campbell and Howard 87; emphasis in original). The conspiracy of *Poetic Licence* is perpetrated by political interests who consider 'winning at all costs' as paramount, so there we have the rise of false values. The danger for me is not so much their desire to win, but their preparedness to do harm to innocents in pursuit of that goal. Their reach and influence into our institutions is beyond mine, and when they resort to violence, they do so without any compunction or regret. They have subsumed the idea of morality in name of an ideology that aims to destabilise liberal values which are perceived to threaten their security. In the end, while the murder is solved and Falullah is made safe, the threat is not removed entirely, merely parked for another four years until the next election, when it will likely re-emerge in even greater ugliness. The enduring message is that "the antagonist is ultimately more enduring than the power of individual agency" (Lynch 2). I think overall, this makes it a negative thriller.

From Idea to Story

T.I.: How does your author move from recognising and admitting the story idea of *Poetic Licence* to evaluating and expressing it in a way that enables it to carry the story before writing begins?

A.L.: This is a significant pedagogical gap, and it worries me that it lacks due attention in our teaching. There's a lot in the literature about how to come up with ideas and find topics to write about, but it appears that many academics and practitioners offering instruction in the field leave out the next step, as though thinking about story as a fulfilled

experience can't happen until the writing has finished and the 'rewriting' begins (see Boulter 12). In many respects, this is the way the 'pantser' writer explains their practice: that they write what they call a 'first draft' and from that determine if there is a story there. I would question, what is it a 'first draft' of? We can certainly come at ideas from bouts of free writing, or as I described earlier, spending time with our characters, but if it is described as a 'first draft', there is an implication that it is a substantial body of writing based on some pursuit towards something concrete, towards a story.

The challenge of converting the 'muse' or the 'dream' or the 'spark' into what can be envisioned as a 'master prelibation' expressed as a story is an important step, which helps establish some evaluation of progress. At some point there has to be a concrete statement of the idea of the story that is to be told and, once found, there is then a challenge in knowing that it is capable of carrying the weight of the novel for the duration of the investment in its development *before* producing 'the written'. Eric Bork has an interesting theory about this which he calls the "60/30/10 Rule" (*The Idea* 13). In essence, his argument suggests that sixty per cent of what makes a work successful lies in the core idea and its expression; thirty per cent lies in the structural choices; and only 10 per cent of the success in the words on the page, or 'the written' – no matter how brilliant they are. It baffles me that creative writing's core pedagogy lies with Bork's final 10 per cent, when clearly much greater emphasis needs to be placed on the development of the idea. Otherwise, why not just leave the teaching of writing with rhetoric and composition studies where it might be argued that writing is a social practice dependent on an audience for its authenticity (see, for example, Roozen "Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity")?

As I point out to Donna Gardner and Elise Jarman, the 'creative' component of 'creative writing' needs to be given far greater emphasis and its teaching needs a mindset that recognises that 'creative practice is long term practise' (see D'Andrea 83). Moving the spark

into a master prelibation takes a lot of thinking about, and ‘writing around’ the idea to establish its readiness. What Amanda Boulter suggests in *Writing Fiction,* that the story emerges from the exploration of “people, setting and events” (11), I would argue is the inverse of what needs to happen; that people, setting and events are produced *by* the story, and, furthermore, it is that production which ultimately drives the investment in the idea.

T.I.: Is it because we know stories from the reading, viewing, or hearing of them and not from their making?

A.L.: When the emphasis on creative writing is that it is ‘part of English’, it is understandable that one does not know the story until they have read it – even the writer. I agree with Bork on this and would argue that the writer needs to be able to evaluate the way they are approaching a writing task for a purpose while doing it; and to do that, somewhere in the mix, there must be an idea of what that purpose is to be. A premise, as such. So, the creative writer needs to know early into the project what is the idea, and how is it to become a story.

In his memo, “The World is Changing”, Jeffrey Katzenberg says: “The idea may be king and high concepts may be powerful, but the crucial step is translating them into compelling stories” (15). According to Roy Peter Clark, this is “some invisible next step” that most writers aspire to. (*Writing tools* 196). In *The Key*, Frey discusses the germinal idea as “that first seed, that hunch that there’s something here that may grow into a story” (43) and in the following few pages, sets out to demonstrate how an idea about a “blue light” came to him and how it might evolve. “I’m going to create a novel about someone whose life is transformed by the adventure they have investigating this light” (44), he writes. In *Damn Good Thriller* he expands his discussion on the geminal idea to include the Hollywood term, ‘high concept’ (ch. 1). In that discussion, the ‘someone’ whose life is going to be transformed by the adventure must be given an impossible mission, which should not just be for their own

benefit but for the benefit of others, during which s/he will face overwhelming odds, and must, facing an increasing sense of urgency, foil evil (7-9).

Part of the problem with a story idea is that it has no substance, and while you know you have a lot of research to do to understand the story, while it remains a vague idea, it is not concrete enough to launch an investigation into what, precisely, you need to learn, which is a critical question. In an early note, *Poetic Licence* was described as how "one man's pursuit to solve a murder leads to the discovery of high political involvement in a people-smuggling operation" (Price "Notebook: Early notes, PL"). It is an idea born in the moment of what happens in that "discovery", and what surges is the suspense around survival beyond that moment – because that is a transformative moment – situating the idea close to the story's climax. But the evolution of the story will be around the question of what leads to that discovery.

T.I.: What work had to be done with *Poetic Licence* to take the next crucial step of making that observation into a story idea?

A.L.: Well, this is where creative work is done – *bringing into being that which hitherto did not exist*, which is how I define 'creative'. I don't believe the germinal idea itself is the creative work; rather, it is what is done to it to make it realisable, and that requires a lot of time and energy and a capacity to commit to the strengths of the idea, which may require writing around it to find its core ingredients. The first objective is to express the concept in a form I call a 'story snapshot statement', and it is this I refer to when I am assessing my students' responses to how they are unfolding their stories. I reflect on the "value in working an idea up from the observation that triggers it through to an articulation of the story idea that produces a vision of an effect wanted and how that idea is formed" (PL 40 [64]). Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston in *Disney Animation* describe as a starting point "the big, simple idea: the story you can tell in two sentences" (367). They point out that, when starting with a

simple statement faithful to the concept, it means that after someone has seen a movie they can tell what it was about in a short narrative statement (368). There is, as David Trottier says, "*implied structure* in [the expression of] good concepts" (*The screenwriter's bible* 25; emphasis in original) and structure helps relate the unfamiliar that an original concept might hold, with the familiar that readers crave. Trottier goes on to say that good concepts "present something extraordinary happening to someone who is ordinary" (26). John Truby, in *The Anatomy of Story* describes a story as tracking what someone wants, what they do to get it, and what they must sacrifice (7-8), placing desire as a key ingredient in the idea. Robert McKee, in *Story*, discusses the 'controlling idea' in much the same way, and being able to express it in a single sentence, he says, helps shape the strategic choices in writing (115).

My author's invention of his version probably began with Thomas and Johnston but found its momentum in a concept from James M. Macon et al. in *Responses to Literature*, which they called the "Someone Wanted But So (SWBS)" strategy. Christopher Vogler has a slightly different take on a similar idea in *The Writer's Journey,* which he calls the NOBA (Not Only But Also) concept. Introducing 'but' or 'however' into an approach similar to Truby's, the statement becomes: "So and so wants something and does something to get it, *but* there are unexpected consequences, forcing so and so to adapt or change in order to survive" (Vogler 306). In a series of PD sessions for ATAR English teachers (2017-19), my author adapted these concepts in a form that identifies the 'central character', their 'desire', the 'resistance' they face, the 'actions and decisions' they take to overcome resistance, and how they 'grow' as an outcome (DRAG). It expresses the story idea as a complete statement of 'effect wanted' in a single sentence comprising the key words, 'Someone wants, but; then so'. This is a vital teaching concept for getting an idea onto the page quickly. The idea of *Poetic Licence,* for example, can be expressed as:

> A teacher *wants* to protect the life of a young asylum seeker whose brother has been murdered, *but* he uncovers a political conspiracy protecting a people-smuggling operation; *then* he decides to unmask the people at the top *so* he can ensure her freedom.

Once the story idea is summarised into a snapshot statement like this, it serves as a guide to what needs to be learned about the character, the situation, and the circuitry of others binding them to those circumstances, and this goes back to understanding *Desires*, *Resistance* to fulfilling those desires, *Actions and decisions* to move towards them, and *Growth* that occurs as a result. The resultant growth, positive or negative, registers as a character's transformation, and it is here that the reader's transformative experience occurs. My author calls this being DRAGged into the story.

T.I.: In a class discussion on story you speak of "channelling Thomas King and Andrew Melrose, their words [yours] to do with what [you] like" (PL 18 [42]). What did you mean?

A.L.: When we are wrestling with how to evaluate a story concept, it helps to have some reference for what the master effect wanted might look or feel like. In *Write for Children*, Melrose says "Writing without a story is like singing a song without a tune. It cannot be done" (16). He argues for change in a critical approach that sees literary theorists often avoid the importance of how a literary piece is constructed using narrative strategies and craft in making "a good, well-told story" (11). Although he agrees that this is improving, this argument points to the importance of story as a pursuit of the creative writer, who must also think critically about the work they are doing while they are doing it. This is not an oxymoron; thinking critically about what is being brought into being is not the same as criticising something that does not yet exist, clearly an impossibility. But being able to apply critical thought is crucial to this practice, so it helps to know how that thinking might be

framed. Melrose argues the writing act communicates the experience of life as story, and how we experience life through stories. In *Storykeeping*, he says, story "is the living trace of our past experience informing the future in present tense" (3), and it plays an important part in all of his writing about writing, artfully linking it to his thinking about a creatively critical and critically creative discourse as a way of addressing "a self-conscious engagement with narrative" (*Monsters Under the Bed* loc. 316; kindle ed.). Connecting the creative and the critical through stories is an important way to discuss the meeting of minds that occurs in the experience gap between readers and writers through the one thing they have in common.

T.I.: And King?

A.L.: Thomas King tells five stories in *The Truth About Stories,* and the first paragraph is the same in each of them. The next two paragraphs are different in each story, but the opening line of the subsequent paragraph is exactly the same for all: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2, 32, 62, 92, 122, 153). In his final chapter, he quotes Ben Okri who says, "We live by stories, we also live in them.… We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate [them] with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives".

In that teaching moment on page 18, I am sensing a connection between Melrose and King; that the essence of story is about making connections, and those connections fill the experience gap between the writer and the reader. It seems to me that that gap needs to be evident when we express a story as concept: it is the difference between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Stories, as Booker says, are trying to tell us that the characters at their centres are those "who must grow up as fit to take on the torch of life from those who went before" (702). The creative writer is the one who brings us those characters.

Change, Creativity, and the Transformative Experience

T.I.: How, in an inquiry such as this, do you evaluate your circumstances and the project?

A.L.: It can be a bit of a worry at times, but I guess in most things we measure our circumstances by coming to some understanding of that which has changed since we set out, or since the last time we established a way-marker, or by some understanding of how far we have yet to go – assuming we know where we intend to get to, which is not always the case. This means we need relative measures of time and some understanding of how change itself functions within the practice research, the making of a novel, and the world of the novel itself. The research, the making, and the subsequent reading are all different types of experience which must engender some learning. Aristotle points to this when he says "to learn gives the liveliest pleasure", and later, "the reason why men [sic] enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring" (Aristotle, *Poetics* section IV). So, if we think of experience as learning and learning as experience, whatever we undertake, I would argue, it is the transformative effect that is under scrutiny when we seek to evaluate what we are doing, or what we have done.

T.I.: How do you frame a reference for transformative learning?

A.L.: It is the slight deviations we sense as changes in knowledge and experience that lead to transformation, but "the ultimate frame of reference for all that changes is the nonchanging" (Wilhelm 281). Of course this is purely theoretical, because change is a constant force – both cyclical, such as day-to-night-to-day…, or sequential as growing older by the year – it does help in our understanding of Mezirow's description of transformative learning as a "process of effecting change in a frame of reference" (5). If we accept that non-change is a foundational frame of reference, then as we grow older, that frame of reference

will also transform. In this inquiry, I think there are two frames of reference, and they have a specific relationship that is intertwined. But, first, we need to agree on some understanding of the terms ‘transformative learning’ and ‘transformative experience’ because these are not that same thing.

In “Perspective Transformation”, Mezirow tells us that transformative learning involves breaking down the habits we form that tend to lock us into ways of thinking and reliving – over and over – the knowledge of our history, because that is what we have come to know in terms of how we define the person we are. The role of story, as Dara Marks says, is to bring some internal knowledge to the surface that may have been well hidden in the subconscious (*The Transformative Function of Story* 3), a concept Jung referred to as ‘individuation’, and this is triggered when we reframe the habits of our history with a critical view of the assumptions that lie behind them in order to alter the roles we play. We stop looking at the same problems in the same way and, with a new take on our problems, we can find new solutions or, in many cases, new problems to solve in new ways.

This deep learning goes on in practice research because the problems we encounter while writing are not always known to us in advance, and very often our set-in-stone views about an issue are challenged by the characters we work with and the circumstances in which they are placed. Moreover, writing often occurs with the subconscious mind activated, an experience Csikszentmihaly termed “flow” and Salman Rushdie refers to when he says his mind functions differently when he is writing to how it does usually (Charlie Rose 0:50-1:00). Practice research leads us to find new ways to resolve those issues and, as writers, we learn new ways to experience human conditions and take that learning with us to future writing projects. In part, this is because “research questions become apparent retrospectively in practice subjects such as Creative Writing” (Derek Neale, "Practice Research" 49). As a

learning discipline, creative writing is, in this way, transformative learning, and pedagogies that embrace transformative learning will have more profound results with students.

The transformative experience, on the other hand, may not necessarily be a deep learning experience which requires a conscious investment in finding new frames of reference, but one that facilitates perception change in small steps, allowing new knowledge to be transferred from one domain to another (Tarabochia and Heddy). On reading a novel, for example, the reader might have been exposed to a new way of thinking about a given human condition and the events surrounding it, and then take that thinking forward into new reading, seeking out texts that explore these ideas further. This isn't learning that alters a frame of reference, but transformation that takes place as a small change in activity or outlook or experience-seeking. The frames of reference in an inquiry like this one, however, impact both transformative learning and transformative experience, although quite possibly in different ways.

T.I.: And the frames of reference?

A.L.: On the one hand there is the imaginary world of the novel, and on the other the world outside of that. So, with *Poetic Licence,* one frame of reference is the relationship of incidents that frames the novel as experienced by us characters in the world we inhabit, which Belknap refers to as the "fabula" (16-17). A reader will experience this in terms of how they identify with the character, or characters, involved in those incidents, and a writer needs to understand this because it goes to techniques of how to lull the reader into the fictive dream in which this experience takes place.

Take, for example, a question of how successful I am in my pursuit of the truth. Using the cause-and-effect relationships that provide the story's structure, the *fabula* enables me to justify certain actions and outcomes, such as activating my poetic licence, and I can do this

because the sequence of events involved in that exists only in the time system determined by the constraints of the story world, and when a reader buys into that, they are suspending disbelief to a certain extent. The frame of reference that sits outside of the world of the novel, however, what Belknap refers to as the "siuzhet", is different. Although it still draws on the relationship between the same incidents and events, it is experienced as a lineal encounter with words accessed in chronological order by the reader in the world containing the text (17). It is through those words that the reader gains access to the *fabula* and the fictive dream that ensues.

To put it simply, the *fabula* is principally mimetic in structure, imitating an arrangement of events according to how the characters live their lives, but the *siuzhet* is shaped consciously to manipulate the reader's experience so that they are able to share or participate in the action, albeit without any influence over the events or the time in which they are arranged. This experience outside the world of the novel is, in Ricoeur's terms, a "refiguration" of the mimesis concocted within the *fabula*, which ultimately contributes to a reader's understanding of change as it is represented in the world of the novel (Dowling 14). In both frames of reference, the transformative arc of character is at the centre of the transformative experience from which the reader learns.

T.I.: Are you suggesting that the writing experience is a journey mimicked by the characters?

A.L.: What gives writing a novel the sensation of a journey is its aspects of a beginning and end with the encounters of landscape, nature, and humans providing new experiences in-between. It's the transformational arc of a character represented by those intersections providing tests of endurance, cathartic release, and epiphanies that guide the narrative movement towards the end (Marks, *Inside Story* loc. 4629-4668). Although, it has to be said, my author struggled mightily finding a structure for *Poetic Licence's* ending,

which just goes to show that the writer does not always know what is coming up, and there are times when a character takes an unexpected turn because there is opportunity to do so, and the outcome is unknown. A hero setting out on a quest to discover their fortune quite quickly realises that fortunes don't just lie in wait to be discovered: they are contested by others who want it for themselves, they are located in impossible to get to places, they are held in secret for if they were widely known they would lose their unique elixir properties.

For the writer, the notion of journey emerges in crossing from a paradigm of the known into a liminal paradigm cluttered with new experiences that are unknown and need to be explored in a way that brings them into the known but leaves open a path to further unknowns. Often, it is times when a hero encounters new obstacles that become moments of discovery for the writer. Dara Marks calls this liminal space a 'borderland', "where new consciousness is beginning to dawn … where we emerge from darkness into light" (loc. 163). This notion of darkness into light is significant, not only in terms of how we measure a journey's progress, but in the ideas of change itself and its role in the making of meaningful culture.

I also think we need to consider the role that change plays in the activities of the creative writer, and view the phenomena of change in the perspective of its impact on the production of art and the evolution of culture. Change is ultimately bound up with notions of difference; that, when we change a thing, or we make alterations, modifications or variations to the state or quality of things, we produce something different, something with different attributes; a transformation occurs consequent to the action or evolution from which change arises. Simply put, changes produce transformation, and movement such as dark into light and soft into firm, today into tomorrow ... produce change.

Day Four | Purpose

Lazaar expands on the purpose of the exegesis in order to explore its making of knowledge and its relation to the core values of theories of story and their relationship to creative writing as a purposeful endeavour.

Reaching the goal

T.I.: What was your author's struggle for an ending?

A.L.: Endings can constitute something of a worry for writers, which also makes it a difficult thing to teach because it's often hard to know what one is. Let's first take the view that an ending is a purposeful action emerging from the self-organising principles of the work. Self-organising principles position purpose as a force that helps one survive, evolve, or adapt (Alexander 9). Of life, there is no ending from which we survive; so, in a work of art, such as a novel, an ending is contrived to suit the purposefulness of its nature and the necessity of survival, evolution, or adaption beyond it. But, as Iris Murdoch points out, "reality is incomplete, art must not be too afraid of incompleteness … there must be dissonance" (qtd. in Kermode 130). Which goes to say that, even though the novel does not literally imitate life, it needs to allow for the incompleteness that goes along with life, while at the same time, reaching a point that leaves the reader satisfied that they have been left with some sense of seeing whole. Stephen King says in *On Writing* how he often leaves an ending to be discovered by his characters, arguing that the benefits of not knowing the outcome as a suspense novelist transfer to "keeping the reader in a state of page-turning anxiety" (165). In *The Last Fifty Pages*, James Scott Bell explains that readers crave satisfaction in an ending "because they often don't get satisfaction in life" (loc. 100). I think a reader wants to feel their needs have been considered by the writer *and* the characters, and that an ending gives them a sense of their own survival, evolution, and adaption.

My author was conscious of this, and found that a number of challenges emerged with the way events started to converge following my hospitalisation which gave him a similar sensation to what King describes above (PL ch. 24 [308-315]). From the outset, there was a sense the novel would end a certain way, which meant that earlier writing was always *towards* something, meeting its purpose, as it were. But the final reckoning between me and Roger Lamord came as something of a surprise. He did not always envisage Lamord getting away with it. In his struggle to bring the unfurling threads of the narrative together, my author read the last 50 pages (only) of several different thriller novels which he had not previously read. This provided a sense of how other authors dealt with generating an effective dénouement, but without having the knowledge of what happened beforehand. The transformative moment for him came out of John le Carre's *The Constant Gardner*, which employs a summary technique written from a future perspective to cauterise the loose ends, and then returns to the present for a final scene of closure.

T.I.: Why did your author choose the novel as the form of the main body of this research?

A.L.: I'd argue that it's the ideal instrument because transformation is long in forming under normal circumstances in life, and we are investigating transformational effects of story. He could have done it with other narrative forms, of course, but the compression of time that the novel provides highlights the effect Dominic Head describes as "the complete temporal consciousness that is sometimes felt to be missing in contemporary life" (*Modern British Fiction* 2). The novel taps into sequences of transformative experience working within a manipulated temporal arrangement to alter perceptions in relation to previous and accumulated experiences. It is, in effect, an investigation into how the world works within the perimeters of its "narrative elements *character, setting and circuitry*" (McCormack, loc. 493; emphasis in original). That is, it sets its boundaries around who is involved, where it takes

place, and whom the actions of those involved affects. By proposing alternative possibilities under realist ideals, the novel gives the reader a window to 'see whole' as an experience without living its actuality, drawing on the effects produced by both objective correlative and verisimilitude to provide a sense of the real. Even though it is only reality represented not replicated (Melrose, *Write for Children* 9), it works to introduce a reality that can be lived while reading, which is a product of story, rendering a novel as a purposeful entity. On reaching the end of the novel, the reader gets a sense that something fundamental has changed in my life, and it is through the making of a novel that this transformation can be examined in some depth.

T.I.: How, as a product of scholarly research, does the making of *Poetic Licence* help in building an understanding of the role of story?

A.L.: Throughout this discussion, I think we have established the importance the role story plays in how change is understood. And, as we have just discussed, the novel is an instrument of that understanding. According to E. M. Forster, "the fundamental aspect of the novel is its storytelling" (25). I agree with this and reiterate something my author has argued in his preface: there can be no novel without story; no story without character. In the writer's hands, it is through character that story can emerge, and it is through story that a novel can emerge. The novel offers a unique way of examining the role of story in all three schemata of creative writing, especially given the fact that within *Poetic Licence*, it explores aspects of a pedagogy in practice as it uncovers scholarship around its practice.

Melrose says in *Monsters Under the Bed* that story "is the most crucial tool in the artist and writer's armoury" (loc. 1822). In *The Seven Basic Plots*, Booker draws a parallel between a story and a piece of music. "Each is based on a sequence of mental images which we unconsciously anticipate will come eventually to a point of perfect resolution" (253). Thinking about these two aspects together gives us a view of a function of story: it can

deliver the sense of ‘seeing whole’, which means at the end of a novel, the story provides for ‘a single unit of understanding’ in terms of what it is about; and it can drive the writing act to mean something bigger than the sum of its parts, which is the basis of its *telos:* its self-organising tendencies that give it its purposefulness. Without its story of a university teacher seeking truth to set a young imperilled girl free, *Poetic Licence* could not exist.

There is another dimension in a work of this type too, and that is one which enables the reader to be engaged with the strangeness that the novel offers and become a part of the research in the act of reading. And this is because, as Nicholas Royle says in *Veering*, once involved with the novel:

> You come to realise that you have veered into it and you go on veering. It is not like a movie or computer game or conversation or session with a psychotherapist, it is another world. It is not simply a separate world, a utopic place.” (13)

Poetic Licence offers a scholar or a teacher a degree of internal discourse around story as a device for understanding. The opening chapter makes an argument about story’s strangeness and offers up four accounts that highlight the strangeness that occurs when we tell stories, and how we, as writers, use them to assert meaning over certain events and aspects of the human condition that would otherwise be inexplicable. Once it is told, we cannot *un-tell* a story, and in some regards, that is what accounts for its strangeness and its importance. When it reaches its conclusion, the reader realises that the strangeness alluded to in the first chapter has come to pass; that the events, for all their self-organising properties, are offered up in a random sort of arrangement that makes sense only in the world of the story. But they *could* make sense in the world outside of the story.

T.I.: Is your world in any way revealed as utopic, do you think?

A.L.: It would be a bit of a worry if it were. But it does operate in a dimension built on a verisimilitude of time, place, and events gleaned from juxtaposing things that actually happened against a fictional way they might have happened. My author's "apprehension of the experience" (James xv) suggests a strong connection between the way we think about story as experience because of the "causal logic of the plot" (Ranciere 198) while we are being exposed to it, and the effect that arises from the conditions in which a character is living and engaging with the goal of the story. The form of the novel offers threads and connections not only within the novel, but to the world beyond, in which research into knowledge can be considered, explored, expressed and challenged (Krauth), much like the way we are doing here.

Representing the Real

T.I.: How do you see the relationship between the realism of fiction and philosophical inquiry?

A.L: Can I just say that James Wood argues that the term "realism" is a misplaced term for Aristotle's mimesis, which, he says, is not about reference to the real, but about how narrated fiction shows us hypothetical possibilities of what might or could happen under the circumstances of the story (178)? The "hypothetical plausibility" of the happenings makes it "the artist's task to convince us that this [really] could have happened" (179). In *Aristotle's Poetics*, D. W. Lucas tells us there is no direct translation into English for 'mimesis' but, within its extraordinary width of meaning, a sense of imitation will be present and its meaning incorporates, in a range of contexts, "imitate", "represent", "indicate", "suggest", "express"" (258). I think it is common for theorists to think of the novel in terms of its imitating life, and therefore frequently discuss its realism or otherwise within that context. It seems to me that there is something of a disconnect between the notion of realism and the idea that the novel can be a type of philosophical inquiry. Although she prefers to think

otherwise, Alexander says, “philosophers agree that their ‘ends’ are always general” (Alexander 26), yet the realist novel leads us towards a particular end.

But novels also occupy a space of cooperative discourse, and, according to Emar Maier, fall into H. P. Grice’s maxim of quality violations: they are “speech acts presenting something believed to be false as if it’s known truth” ("Making up stuff"). But the fictional world we characters occupy, as distinct from what might be thought of as the real world where readers exist, is generated by the text that the reader gets access to, which means that everything within that world *is* real (if it were not, the world could not exist), and the only connection to what critics might think of as the real (human) world is the reader. There’s another thing, though, and that’s the very real connection between readers and characters which occupies a liminal space between the text and receptive mind, and that depends entirely on the writer’s intervention to exist. So, I agree with Wood and think we ought to dispense with the term realism and instead talk about truth, which I have already discussed at some length. But I would just add that, in the novel, truth is not a distinction from lies and falsehoods, because fiction and lying belong to different categories of speech act, with different intentions, and we have to conclude, taking into account our previous discussion on unreliable narration, that not everything in a fictional account can be proclaimed to be true, but there is a truth that the writer intends to be got at through the relationship between reader and character.

That said, we can now talk about how, as a form of research, the academic novel influences the way we think about the way we think (Geertz) by encouraging our view of fiction through the role of character as the centre from which “new knowledge is produced … between consciousness and the unconscious” (Hecq 181). Our access to new knowledge in this way of thinking comes through creative writing acting to shape story, and how our work in shaping story shapes the novel. We learn something new so that we can bring some

originality to the story, and we learn something new because of that 'making', which we can then apply to the field. This is what makes it purposeful: creative writing becomes both the maker and the product of the work in which it exists.

T.I.: Are you saying that creative writing is a cause, and story the purpose?

A.L.: Can we say that creative writing is an 'act for purpose'? It is a relationship between creativity and writing, in so much as creativity is a dynamic system, existing for a purpose of bringing into being that which hitherto exists only in the form of an idea; and writing, the actions that serve creativity's purposes by making the thinking the creativity generates comprehensible. The author's intention, if we can contradict Philip Pullman for a moment, is to bring into being a text that contains knowledge that did not exist in the way it now exists. At the heart of that is the story that is being told; the transformative effect is realised in the understanding that is produced. The events the narrative sets forth are selected for the values they bring to the story or how the story resolves the issues they raise. The required progression of the narrative means that its "events exist because of the purpose they serve" (Alexander 13). If there is no purpose, there is unlikely to be a resolution, or a transformation, which calls into question whether there would be a story. In this sense, story is a form of organised representation, and one of the problems that we have encountered with the rise of postmodernism is the reduction of organised representation in art, giving rise to the notion that art is reducible to process, and that consequently the focus becomes the activity of doing rather than what the doing is leading to, or purpose.

And still we hear at conferences, and read in the literature, about the creative *process* or the writing *process*, as though the mechanistic application of sequential activity is the final destination, and not the value the activity generates. As Graeme Harper points out:

> Creative Writing is action and movement, and it can't possibly be approached accurately if it is seen to be fixed in place and time by a set of textual reference points that are related primarily to one moment of what many will call a 'process' (and I call, alternatively, 'acts and actions'). ("Creative Habitats and the Creative Domain" 2)

It seems vacuous to have to give the subject of something so important, so fundamental, as 'writing' or 'creative' to 'process'.

T.I.: Surely you can write just to exercise your creativity?

A.L.: Of course. Getting involved with word play, using writing games, and undertaking writing exercises are all grist for the writing mill; it is the way we go about learning how to generate the effects that can ultimately be put to use in a larger piece of work, or discarded as failure. But we need to teach it that way, as though it is purposeful, not as ends in themselves. 'It failed therefore it is no good,' is not acceptable in the writing room. It might well be 'good', just not for the problem under investigation at that moment. I make a point to tell my students that nothing in the writing room should ever be discarded or erased, merely put aside for future visitation.

However, the subconscious is at work all the time and, as Alexander says, intentionality "is the emergence of meaningful patterned behaviour" (28). We can't escape the patterns and ideas that shape who we are and generate themes about how the world fits around us that we call upon and recall and fit into other themes that expand to allow new experiences to enter. We all think in themes; and writing to exercise creativity is one way we expand our repertoire of thematic experience. This experience is one that takes us through movements and changes: of ourselves as thinking, feeling entities; of the world as a changing landscape of culture and knowledge; and the chaos and anti-chaos that has to be negotiated if we are to make any sense of it at all.

T.I.: What is the most difficult aspect, do you think, of positioning story in its role in creative writing practice?

A.L.: Thinking about story as an experience in the mind of the hearer, not as an object that can be carried around like a suitcase is, to my mind, the main worry. This is the point I try to get my class to understand in that early lesson (PL 18-19 [42-43]). We learn from Richard Kearney in *On Stories* that the importance of storytelling to human evolution in Western civilisation dates back to when Hesiod tells us: "the founding myths were invented to explain how the world came to be and how we came to be in it". Kearney says, "while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition *human*" (3; emphasis in original.). The essence of story is its capacity to transfer experience from one mind to another in a form that can be thought of as a 'single unit of understanding' produced from the strange sequence of mental images that "emerge from some place in the human mind which functions autonomously, independent of any storyteller's conscious control" (Booker 543). In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell fuses this experience with that of transformation, which he describes as difficult thresholds "that demand a change in the patterns not only of conscious but also of unconscious life" (8). And we have very early experiences of story in life, too, starting to "tell stories as soon as we begin to explain events and actions, feelings and motives" (Meek, *On Being Literate* 103), which is perfectly logical when you consider Mark Turner's discussions around narrative imagining, small stories, and image schemas. In *The Literary Mind*, Turner says we project story as a form of thinking before acting, and this projection "operates throughout everyday life" because story "is the fundamental instrument of thought" (7, 4). I would argue, therefore that story is 'an experience that infects the mind with aspects of human nature that cannot otherwise be easily explained or understood'.

T.I.: Do you have a conclusion on the role of story for the creative writer?

A.L.: I would start by summing up the conventions of story as expressions … of survival skills, of transitioning through growth into adulthood and coping with our subsequent decline, of finding a place within a society's power structures, warning us of the dangers of dark forces that constitute the unknown, and uplifting us into the realms of hope and possibility. The role of story for the creative writer, therefore, is an effect that arises out of the actions a character takes to alter the circumstances in which they find themselves. This effect has an emotional residue that translates to the reader as an experience, resonating with their unique view of reality. Irrespective of whether the experience is conveyed through the narrative act of prose, verse, dramatic action, film, gameplay, comics, or spoken word, at the heart is a desire, resistance, action, and growth. This represents a truth.

In teaching creative writing, there needs to be a bigger engagement with thinking about how the discipline contributes to a modern creative economy. In a meeting with Donna Gardner and Elise Jarman, I argue that

> our future students are graduating into an economy where ideas raise the capital rather than land and materials.… And what creative writing does – right at its core and, I would argue, better than any other discipline – is teach students how to work with ideas: how to find them, shape them, develop them, express them. So, there is a clear economic argument, creative writing increases students' employability prospects in any field. (PL 26 [50])

The making of knowledge in a creative economy is dependent on creative literacy and skills for creative practice, and these are central to the pedagogy of creative writing (Healy 63). We can no longer pursue a teaching strategy that suggests that after "having read an example of a story, we can reverse engineer the experience and create one" (Price "Rising Tension" 77) – pedagogy all too commonly found in high school English classrooms and undergraduate creative writing courses. No matter how much we unpick an extant text, we will never arrive

at the creative act that brought it into being – the curious observation, its resulting ‘master prelibation’, and its transformation into story, into something worth writing about.

And that, in the findings of this research, is the foundational theory of story that lies at the core of the creative writer’s practice, and their pursuit of story.

Conclusion

> It is astonishing how little attention critics have paid to Story considered in itself. Granted the story, the style in which it should be told, the order in which it should be disposed, and (above all) the delineation of the characters, have been abundantly discussed. But the Story itself, the series of imagined events, is nearly always passed over in silence, or else treated exclusively as affording opportunities for the delineation of character. (C. S. Lewis, On Stories 3)

In this research, I set out to investigate how the role of story and its transformative effects impact creative writing practice in the writing of a novel. I found that in acts of making a work, I pursued an understanding of human experience emerging through an expression of a curious observation involving human actors, unusual events, and purposeful objects. While this pursuit suggests that in the end something is wanted, a phenomenon I explore through the research as 'prelibation', I found that it is in pursuit of satisfying this prelibation that story emerges as a creative experience giving rise to 'a single unit of understanding'. It became clear to me that in the work of creative writing the text does not exist; rather it is always in the making and, therefore, cannot be examined in terms of analysis and criticism. I join many other scholars and teachers in arguing that, in order to move the teaching of creative writing away from a model of analysis and criticism, it is necessary for teachers to write so they can make comparisons in experience rather than in 'the written'. I came to understand writing through this research as the experience of making thinking comprehensible. And a respondent, in a distant time or place can absorb the same experience, leading to transformation.

As Art Lazaar discusses throughout the exegesis, one of the central concerns of my research emerged from my perception that the creative writing classroom lacks engagement with story as a theoretical space in the making of work. But, as C. S. Lewis points out in the

quotation above, it is apparently not only the creative writing classroom where this lack occurs. Allowing for change in the intervening years, it is not clear why, in my experience and in C. S. Lewis's, that was so. I argue that story is the way we understand the macro aspects of human nature: the human condition. It is my thesis that this cognitive device gives us access to community consciousness and stored memory that expresses a collective culture which can be shared. In creative writing, story's role is to harness opportunities to express new and unique observations as part of that community consciousness, enabling access – in a different place and time – to the making of new experiences. My research explored this role through accessing micro details, details reflected in the imagined events of *Poetic Licence*, details expressed through the actions and decisions of the novel's characters, details found in the places where those actions occur, stirring disturbing pangs of verisimilitude. Without the minutia of detail, the story of *Poetic Licence* could not take shape because the reading mind needs those details to fund its understanding. And, correspondingly, it is the macro view that gives the sense that a story has been experienced, a sense of a single unit of understanding: an effect generated by writing, an act of making thinking comprehensible.

Poetic Licence, the novel at the heart of this inquiry, supplies both an abundance of minor detail in a consequential sequence of events that ultimately offers a macro view of an inescapable impulse "toward ... order implied in human events" (Louise Cowan qtd. in Marks 89). There is a recognisable transformative experience for Art Lazaar, the central character, when he realises that, although he has lost the fight for justice, in the end, he has met the demands of his premise: he has made Falullah safe. This moment translates into an understanding that order is required, and the reader feels – as a consequence of the events in the story – that life as we know it has changed. My research illustrates how the performance of creative writing harnesses emergent possibilities in which a character, in certain circumstances, offers to take the writer into new territory: circumstances from which the

writer must learn if they are to bring the character back into the known, or explore what might lie in the unknown. This led to my authorial transformation as emergent experiences in which I used art to revisit previously lived experiences. This struck me as a dilemma, a form of conflict, a paradox around which I found it necessary to negotiate new ways, and it produced new learning in writing and ways of thinking, raising internal knowledge to the surface that may have previously been hidden by the subconscious. The writing acts that brought the story into being tapped these hidden reservoirs and produced emergent experiences and transformative effects recognised as deep learning.

Theories of story for the creative writer, as investigated through my research, rest on a different epistemology to theories of analysis and criticism found in studies of Literature and English. The principle of this lies in the simple proposition that, for the creative writer, the text is always in the making, and the acts of writing seek to explore liminal spaces *between* known phenomena. Analytical and critical theories, on the other hand, depend on the extant text, and the liminal spaces have been explored and brought into *the known* by the writer for the benefit of the reader. This distinction is explored throughout the exegesis and in the novel itself in which theories of story are discussed by Art Lazaar, both in his role as a creative writing teacher, and in his subsequent interviews. Theories of story for the creative writer, I argue, are those theories that enable discussion to take place around common practices found in approaches to making thinking comprehensible. These experiences, with their genesis in the curious observation, find realisation in characters, consequential events, and transformation, ultimately giving rise to satisfying a master effect wanted we recognise as story.

In the end, however, this is an incomplete inquiry. As I said at the outset, the exegesis is a living document, which means that, as the Art Lazaar Interviews proceeded, for many questions answered, more emerged still to be explored. While many pedagogical problems

are addressed throughout the work, ranging from how to develop deeper understandings of story, investing more into developing the ideas, expressing story as an effect wanted, working with a creative cycle, resisting process, creating characters and working with point of view, more work needs to be done on how theories of story can be better employed in the hands of the creative writing teacher. Further development on how they can be refined and discussed as key creative practice; on how we might go about assessing student creative writing as actions for making thinking comprehensible rather than artefacts of the written held up in example; on how we might learn how to distance the imposing effects of the hegemony of English and Literature and the reliance on critical and analytical theory for pedagogy; on how we might revisit our understanding of creativity for the benefit of art and its place in the emerging creative economy will all be of benefit to the creative writing teacher. I hope others are willing to pick up the baton and join me in future endeavours.

Postscript: Response to Examiners

The examiners of this thesis provided thoughtful and insightful feedback on the inquiry, much of which I accepted and incorporated into a revised version of the work. What became clear to me is that creative writing as a research method is an unwieldly beast at best. Dr Paul Williams advised me to review the methodology and incorporate more scholarship about creative writing as research, which I did (p. 13), and found that creative writing as research still struggles to find its legitimate place in the academy under the kind of terms creative writing practitioners, researchers and teachers would most like it to be; and under struggling compliance to definitions supplied by the OECD's Frascati Manual, to which the respective research bodies in Australia (ERA) and the UK (REF) refer. Andrew Cowan's excellent review of the situation in his *TEXT* Journal article "Creative Writing as research writing" shows that creative writing practice as a research methodology is still sidelined in terms of how it is regarded for the production of knowledge, and safeguarded under the care of literary studies rather than with other art disciplines. He concludes that "While the nature of the literary practice licenced by the REF now diverges from that licenced by ERA, neither depends on any lasting settlement of the art and knowledge debate" (16). My revision of methodology does expand and integrate creative writing as a research methodology but retains its framing with writing as research, a/r/tography, fictocriticism and autoethnography.

Both Paul Williams and Prof. Andrew Melrose pointed out that the exegetical component could well have been fully incorporated within the creative artefact to be presented as creative writing research and obviating the need for any preface, concluding, or appendix statements. I can see considerable merit in this approach (and it quite naturally appeals to my creative instincts) and makes sense were the research contained within the practice aspects of creative writing only. Along with Paul Williams's comment about the size

and scope of the subject (discussed on p. 9), I find it necessary to point out that this research has a global concern about all three schemata of creative writing (its practice, study, and teaching) and if it focused only on the practice of investigating the role of story in the writing of a political thriller, the very great concerns about my perceived gaps in creative writing pedagogy (p. 14) would not be highlighted and explored to the extent they are. I hope I have addressed these concerns in a satisfactory way throughout the body of the work, without losing the qualities of what Dr David Whish-Wilson described as "a very solid piece of work."

The title of the thriller novel in the examined thesis raised concerns with both Paul Williams and David Whish-Wilson. The original title was "The Balsamic Jihad", a deliberate play on words and poetic coincidence, and a tongue-in-cheek look at the way the Australian 2013 election was fought. Other readership indicated the title was problematic – it tended to divide readers into two camps: those who loved it and those who hated it. Consequently, the artefact title has been changed to *Poetic Licence*, based on the unique characteristic of the central character. Paul Williams also recommended changing the thesis title from "A Turning Point: The role of story and its transformative effects in creative writing" because of a concern that it indicated too broad a subject matter and the title would better serve the research if it were more focused and included a reference to the novel, which it now does. The abstract statement and the research questions follow suit on this matter.

Another area of concern with which I felt some sympathy, was a question of the artificial nature of the Art Lazaar Interviews and the loaded questions from an invisible interviewer (see discussion pp. 449-50). Andrew Melrose and Paul Williams both raised concerns that the voice of Art Lazaar did not appear sufficiently differentiated to that of me, the author, and that the questions were often raised in a manner that simply supported the researcher's view of the subject. This latter technique was a deliberate attempt at humour, and

the interviews should be regarded in some respect as an ironic twist that the central character of the work is ‘somehow an important figure’ in the grand scheme of things. The matter of voice has been addressed by raising a little attitude in Art Lazaar as interviewee – who also comments about the ‘lame nature of the interviewer’s questions’ (p. 449) – and giving him a turn of phrase that has also been inserted into the novel. The interviews are modelled on the style of *The Paris Review*, where the interviewer is unidentified, and the purpose of the interview is to extract the skills and methods of the writer as though they are somehow ‘magical’. Art Lazaar is not of this standing.

Some recommendations were made by the examiners in respect of the novel, most notably some minor concerns with the way the academic content was delivered by Art Lazaar during his teaching moments coming across as “info dumps”, or what another colleague of mine likes to refer to as the “Tom Clancy disease”, where the novelist’s research is held up in some jarring contradistinction to the narrative. While I accept that this aspect can be further polished, and Paul Williams’s most helpful comparisons between Art Lazaar and J. M. Coetzee’s characters in Elizabeth Costello draw attention to ways the character could be developed, I need to note that I am not the writer J. M. Coetzee is, and my characters are not his. The novel will be revisited in view of its potential as a commercial publication and these commentaries – in particular, David Whish-Wilson’s most helpful observations – will be considered in that light. For the moment, though, the structure of the novel remains as it was and attention has only been paid to minor grammatical amendments and the inclusion of a turn of phrase to match the Art Lazaar character of the novel to his version as interviewee.

Finally, I want to turn to the issue that my primary texts may be indicative of narrow research, and my penchant for referencing my own texts. James N. Frey’s works are, for me, foundational in my journey, and the reasons for this are discussed in the Appendices (note: James Frey is a different author to James N. Frey). Art Lazaar takes issue with a perception

of academic snobbery that looks down on writers of “How to…” books and the potential damage that such snobbery can do to student learning (p. 426). Frey is foundational because the subject of story and its theories in a mode of making as opposed to reception is well explored in his work and less well explored in the works of other academics (Frey taught novel writing at UC Berkeley for 30+ years). And while Frey is foundational, my research over the years of this inquiry has included a wide range of texts on writing craft, editing craft, creative writing practice from skilled practitioners, as well as theorists in creative writing and literary studies, and the writing of crime and thriller novels, and a comprehensive bibliography has now been included. On the matter of referencing my own works: during the course of this inquiry (2013-19), and as a consequence of its subject matter, I have published a creative writing text book, an associated workbook, and several journal articles using the character of Art Lazaar. These works contain much of the theory I have engaged with and explore my own pedagogical approach to teaching creative writing. They are integral to the inquiry and part of its very large scope.

The inclusion of this postscript is to express my appreciation for the thoughtful and helpful feedback on this inquiry from the examiners, and acknowledge the opportunity of a ‘post-thesis’ dialogue that has encouraged me to improve the strength of the dissertation, and perhaps lit the way for further post-doctoral work.

Appendices

1. The Writer

I hunt in themes, fish in narratives, and gather in plots.

In 1990, when I was creative director (with copywriting responsibilities) and partner in a fledgling marketing, advertising and design practice, we were tasked with bringing into being a name, visual identity and corporate ethos for a new children's clothing retailer. I had just completed a major project for a regional government agency that took me through 22 shire districts, talking with local government and community leaders in order to write, design and produce a promotional package that sold the economic benefits for development in the region to international investors and agencies. It was a road trip of around 2500 kilometres in a period of a week, and exhausting. But it left me with a heightened awareness to stories emerging from the time spent listening and recording the thoughts of people in remote and dusty places, gathering insights that would otherwise have been invisible to me, insights I was destined to share with a wider global audience on behalf of the state government. It left me with notions to write stories of my own involving the people and cultures of the places I had visited. It seemed the world needed to know.

This heightened awareness to stories informed my approach to the task of building an identity for a children's clothing retailer and resulted in developing a storyline that integrated the proposed identity with grooming for children. The story I told the client in the presentation involved a young boy who had taken his pup for a walk and the pup suddenly dashed off into the forest, the boy followed and became lost. When the sun set, he was miraculously found by a band of strange fairy creatures who took him to a secret corroboree among the tingle trees where he was fed and entertained by mobs of animals, birds and reptiles who attended the ceremony. He discovered, as the night wore on, that animals were

lining up at the massive splits in the tingle trees and emerging looking as though they had spanking new coats and scales and feathers. He learned that the fairy creatures who had brought him to the ceremony were called *Little Gronups* and were responsible for grooming the animals, providing their colours and ministering to the aesthetic needs that supported the natural order. As the sun rose in the east, he was returned to the edge of the forest with his pup, now sporting a brand-new spot. The retailer was named *Little Gronups*. Unfortunately, like many small businesses, the business did not survive beyond a few years, but the story remained with me, and with some modifications to the characters involved, grew into my first novel, *Kumakana: A Gronups Tale*.

The power of story as an approach to creating enduring advertising and marketing (Salmon; Wertime) was to continue in our business ecology and, as we developed, our practice persisted with the notion that stories offered the best opportunities to create client advertising that featured long media shelf life. The creative strategy framework I developed bore a striking resemblance to the way story as a structure is frequently thought about, building on the notion that product-as-protagonist wants to offer a consumer some version of freedom from worry, but faces opposition in the form of brand and product competition; then takes action or suggests a decision, so a solution to the problem built on its key competitive benefit is articulated. The following radio jingle for Mrs Macs Pies that I wrote in 1998 and used in a national radio campaign for the brand over several years is one such example.

When a man's out on a job, trying hard to earn a crust,

He's workin' up an awful hunger doing it from dawn to dusk.

With every blow the pangs are biting and the sweat's drippin' in the dust.

"Eat," he cries, "Yeah, gimme a pie … Meat not too much crust."

Cos a workin' man's lunch ain't just a snack: it's a big beef pie, it's a Mrs Macs;

> A workin' man's lunch ain't just a snack, and if it ain't a Mrs Macs … Take it back! ("Working Man's Lunch")

Two texts that came into my hands became formative throughout this period. One day, late in 1990, as I walked through my local shopping centre, I passed a bookshop that was closing down, its stock set out in a desperate plea for liquidation, and on the edge of the table, a title caught my eye, *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* (Frey): a diminutive paperback of just 175 pages. Never had I quite seen a book like this one. It appealed to my yearning to become a novelist, especially since I was, at the time, brimming with stories inspired by my recent regional sojourn through the dusty WA Midwest; but moreover, it set before me a fully detailed, straightforward set of principles by a thriller writer who was teaching this stuff in one of the world's most prestigious universities: University of California, Berkley. And to this day, having read, and added to, an ever-increasing collection of books about creative writing's writing craft, no book comes close to Frey's *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*, for it sets out not just the 'how to', but the 'why' of it too, and in direct, uncluttered terms. Most importantly, it introduced me to a formative concept of story: *A story is a narrative of consequential events involving worthy human characters who change as a result of those events* (72; emphasis in original).

The second text came by way of browsing MPH's bookshop in Singapore at the end of that same year where I came across a copy of the Richard Wilhelm translation of the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*. It seemed to me that change was not just central to story as stressed by Frey, but central to the marketing solutions and business outcomes clients desired, especially in terms of consumer behaviour. I, myself, was on a quest to change. I thought it logical that the more I understood change, the better I might understand my role and how to accomplish things of which I dreamed. It has been the most thumbed, the most read, the most reread, book in my library – that particular copy is now in tatters, with pages torn at the edges

and drifting without anchorage to the binding, and while I bought a replacement copy of the same edition in a second hand bookshop in London in 2018, I still turn to the one best used. The *I Ching* (pronounced *E-Ching*, also spelled *Yi Jing* and frequently referred to as just *I or Yi*) is a complex study in ancient China of the impact on people of phenomena that produce changes in their lives, and perhaps the oldest recorded discussion on change and its influence on human affairs. While it is thought that the book itself was assembled sometime between the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., Japanese scholar Ito Togai points out that:

> In deep antiquity when there were not yet any characters, symbols were drawn in order to express fully the images of the change of decrease and increase of dark and light in order to divine [following them] the success and failure of the activities of the people. (Shchutskii 208)

Throughout its history, the *I Ching* has encompassed philosophy, science, politics, strategy, and influenced the production of art from ancient times. As a text it survived the great book burning under Ch'in Shih Huang in 213 B.C.E., and bibliographers of old China believed in the tradition that traced its formation to such an extreme antiquity that no other classical book could compete with it in chronological importance (although it is not the oldest of Chinese written documents). Such is its importance that "nearly all that is greatest and most significant in the three thousand years of Chinese cultural history has either taken its inspiration from this book or exerted an influence on the interpretation of its text" (Wilhelm 42). The *I Ching* is concerned "not with beings themselves but with how, where and when beings occur in a process of becoming" (Shang "Why Is It Change Instead of Being?" 383-384), thus we can say life is one way here, but another way there, represented by a collective reality. And I think I can say with some certainty, that story and change became intermingled with my personal pursuit of understanding from that point in 1990 and have both been firmly embedded with my identity as a writer ever since.

2. The Teacher

At the close of the school year in 2004, my eldest daughter's classroom teacher cornered me and said: "I need two things next year – a creative writing program for my class, and an outside expert in the classroom." The latter of these two things was part of her PhD study. The former was the challenge I responded to, provided, I said, "it leads to something tangible for the students." We set aside a two hour slot one afternoon each week for a full semester, a total of about 40 hours, and I began by asking myself the simple question: What ten things about writing a story, had I known earlier in life, would have helped my writing career? I made a list and turned to Frey for the answers.

At the time, I had no training as a teacher, and was not eligible for registration with the Teachers Registration Board (then known as the Western Australia College of Teachers [WACOT]). I would write my intended lesson on Sunday and deliver it, under the classroom teacher's supervision, on the Wednesday of each week. Following the lesson, I would sit with the teacher for a few minutes and discuss the lesson and progress. In that year, we had 20 students in the program. They learned about what is story, how we create characters, using archetypes, story plot techniques, conflict, premise and moral, beginnings and climax, dialogue, and writing scenes. They each wrote and illustrated a story and prepared it for publishing, which they celebrated at an event in a local writers' centre, selling their books and receiving a publishing royalty on sales. The following commentary on the outcome appears in my reflection on the program:

> Every child in the class can tell you what a story is. And by that definition, what a story is not! They have a very clear understanding of what they need to look for, invent or create in order to present a story.

> They all developed an innate sense of exploring characters as the basis for storytelling, and their stories show that, regardless of their level of writing, their characters are central to their stories.
>
> They all quickly grasped the idea of conflict as the central crucial device in storytelling; that they must have opposing values or objectives within the motivations of their characters.
>
> Concepts that were less easily understood were the concepts of Premise, Theme and Moral; and the development of Dialogue. These are areas that we will develop further in scriptwriting.
>
> The “word-bag” containing the weekly mystery word was a highly anticipated moment in each lesson. If it was forgotten, I was quickly reminded that they hadn’t gotten their words for the week.
>
> Dictionaries and thesauruses quickly became commonplace on desks during times other than writing. This alone, I believe is one of the major achievements. (Price "Creative Writing Program")

I returned to that school every consecutive year until 2015, where I experimented with the program model, teaching students how to write in groups, writing play scripts, songs, television and picturebooks in addition to short stories published in anthologies. Under advice from the classroom teacher, I promoted the program into other schools and writers” centres, modifying its content as I learned more, set the focus on prose writing, and produced anthologies of completed works rather than single books, which were celebrated in an annual launch event at the Perth Writers Festival family day. I called it *The Born Storytellers*, and between the years of 2006 and 2015 delivered the program in 18 schools and writers centres to students in upper primary, middle and upper high school, publishing a total of 671 students

in 63 volumes. In 2013 I was invited by Prendiville Catholic College to deliver a program to a cohort of 200 year 9 students in the following year. Up to that point, I had only ever taught in small classes, in direct control of the content. This was a new challenge and had to include professional development for teachers so that they could pick up and maintain the delivery of content into their classes. I published a theory and teaching manual for their use, which included a student workbook section and called it *Story Craft* (Price), delivered two short PD (Professional Development) sessions to teachers, and ran the program over seven weeks using a weekly lecture format. Prior to the lecture, students would undertake a required reading, and teachers would have the students follow through with their writing practice in the classroom. This was deemed a success and repeated the following year, a year in which I became qualified to teach in WA classrooms, and I subsequently took up teaching secondary English, albeit for a short time.

Early in 2017 a news article caught my eye. The markers of the 2016 Australian Tertiary Admissions Rankings (ATAR) in WA had “raised concerns that many students used inappropriate language in the creative writing section of last year’s English exam and their choice of subject matter was too graphic” (Hiatt). The headline of Hiatt′s article informs the public that the examiners were ″shocked by ″graphic″ language″ but the report itself was not indicative of such emotion (School Curriculum Standards Authority [SCSA],). This raised fiery responses in social media following a posting from local author and creative writing lecturer, David Whish-Wilson, who wrote: ″looks more like markers not being up with the edgy nature of much current YA lit″ ("There goes that creative writing again, corrupting the youth.") Several commentators on Whish-Wilson′s thread expressed opinions that the problem lay with the sensibilities of the markers. However, I viewed the problem a little differently.

> The SCSA examiners' report, Hiatt's article, and the subsequent social media commentary illustrates the possibility that a gap in knowledge transfer exists in the teaching of creative writing to high school students by English teachers, particularly those needing to satisfy prescribed ATAR standards. This gap is more likely predicated on a lack of disciplinary understanding by English teachers to effectively teach students the combination of theory and practice required to develop creative writing excellence than on a lack of sensibilities of exam markers. (Price "Creative Writing PD Presentation" 7)

I pitched my analysis to the School of Education at my university, suggesting that this was a problem "we" could do something about, but there lacked any appetite. Following subsequent discussions with my PhD supervisor who mustered some support from the School of Arts, I decided to address the problem myself and launched a Professional Development Masterclass for ATAR English Teachers in July 2017. The School of Arts provided the venue, and the School of Education supported the program with promotional and marketing assistance. To the end of 2018, I had run the Masterclass PD 11 times, with a total of 168 ATAR English teachers attending from 82 different schools in WA. In round terms, this represents about one-third of all schools teaching ATAR level English in the state, and I estimated that approximately half of all WA teachers teaching ATAR English had attended. In further support for teachers who had attended the PD program, I added a Creative Writing Classroom Incursion for ATAR students "designed to address the specific areas of weakness identified by the 2016 ATAR exam markers as well as concerns recognised by ATAR English teachers" (Price "Creative Writing Classroom Incursions").

The focus of the ATAR student incursion day targets the main assessments in the examination to produce a piece of imaginative prose writing. I introduce them to a simple construction device for expressing a story idea, demonstrate it through examination of a short

text extract, explain the theory behind the model and, using a range of techniques to interrogate a prompt, put the model into practice. Throughout the day, their writing activity increases, covering techniques for creating characters, writing dialogue and developing a scene. I received the following comment from a Year 11 ATAR student from an incursion day held in September 2019:

> As a year 11 student, I found the creative writing incursion very helpful and eye-opening. Kevin introduced different approaches to exam time management which I will very likely apply during my exams. In addition, Kevin's explanation of the, "someone wants but then …" strategy taught us how to develop a structured story in a more time efficient way. Overall, Kevin's lecture was incredibly useful. (Price "Comment")

While I have progressed from teaching upper primary students in a single school to developing professional knowledge in teachers, it is clear that story, and the tools we need for the practice of how we write a story, remains a core focus of my teaching and is central to my identity as a teacher.

3. The Scholar

My diary notes the date: October 11, 2008, the first of two days I spent in a writing workshop held in Berkeley, California with James N. Frey, whose first instructional book *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* was more than slightly instrumental in starting me on my current journey. I took with me, as instructed, 20 pages – ten from the beginning, and ten from later in the work – from my then work-in-progress, the novel that had originated with the story in 1990 behind *Little Gronups*. Frey's specialty at UC Berkeley was teaching novel writing and the workshop included readings of works-in-progress from eight participants and

short lectures and discussions on various theories. It was my first experience of workshopping my writing in this way, a study of the writing under scrutiny in a round-robin by eight peers. The work was read aloud by the writer while others read silently along, annotating their copies as they went. At the reading's conclusion, a couple of minutes were set aside for the respondents to gather thoughts and record responses before breaking into critical commentary, which went around the table with each participant allocated three minutes. Frey always had the last say, and the author was not a participant in the discussion, a sensation that I believe gives real-life experience to Barthes' notions that "as soon as a fact is narrated … the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins" (Barthes 142).

The experience changed the way I thought about how writing works once it enters another's consciousness, because, as Frey said at the time, once it's written the only justification for any decisions apparent in the writing that the author can make is in the rewriting–save it for then. Several gems from the discussions found their way into my thinking, my teaching and my writing.

'In all great dramatic works," Frey said, "something strange happens that's true to human nature. The reader sees things in a new way, but while reading it, it's strange" (Price "James N. Frey workshop"). This is my first real inkling of understanding the transformative experience. If the reader is sympathetic to the character, they will experience the same sensation of transformation as the character, something from within a collective unconsciousness will surface through that sensation. In *Poetic Licence*, Art Lazaar alludes to this with his class when he says: "The transformative effect is twofold: the character and or their circumstances, and you, transformed. And only story can do that, that is its *strangeness* [emphasis in original]" (PL 22 [44]). Frey pointed out the importance of verisimilitude in this

transformative sensation: it must ring true, both to the character's circumstances, and to life as the reader imagines it.

Premise was another subject of considerable discussion. It is a topic Frey spends substantial effort on in both volumes of *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* (Damn Good Novel, Damn Good Novel (vol2)). He sees arriving at a premise as a critical stage in the development of the story idea, a driving force for the momentum of the writing, a telos. Much of his thinking around premise comes from Lajos Egri who says "Everything has a purpose, or a premise. Every second of our life has its own premise whether or not we are conscious of it at the time" (*The Art Of Dramatic Writing* 1). Having a clear-cut premise, says Egri, "will lead you unmistakeably to the goal your play hopes to reach" (6). Frey explores this in relation to story in *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* and says "every good premise should contain an element of *character* which through *conflict* leads to a *conclusion* [emphasis in original]*"* (62). Frey revisits premise in the second volume, revising his ideas of the concept, "simplified and explained" (*Damn Good Novel (vol 2)* 49), introducing ideas of "three types of premises" (59), and the "multipremise novel" (72), pointing out that some novels comprise of more than one story, but it is story to which premise applies. I mention these, because in our 2008 workshop, Frey pointed out how difficult the theory of premise is to teach, and how he had returned again and again to Egri for further clarity. "Premise is what matters," he said. "It is a statement of the kind of dramatic character, the kind of dramatic transformation, the kind of dramatic struggle – a profound transformation resulting from the pole-to-pole growth of the character, which comes from conflict" (Price "James N. Frey workshop").

There were other theoretical discussions on a range of topics including the technique of point of attack – beginning a scene in rising action and backfilling the details as you go along, creating obstacles and creating characters motivated to overcome them, maintaining conflict in dialogue, giving minor characters "snappy" dialogue lines and using them to

characterise main players, using conflict to "peel back layers" of a character, using the character's agenda to create reader identification, using an objective correlative to generate sympathy to a character's emotional state, the mythic paradigm … and more.

It was about six months later that I took the plunge to formally address what I felt had been, for some time, gnawing at me like an uncontrolled hunger into a personal knowledge gap, and enrol in a university undergraduate program. Quite typical of the mature aged learner, a significant "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow) appeared at the prospect of subjecting myself to higher education: *Would what I learn dismantle what I already know and fail to support my current knowledge and teaching activities?* Notions of guilt and shame appeared as well, triggered by a personal perspective of my own inadequacies as a teacher and the notion that there is always something "ponderous and one-sided about the learning of the self-taught" (Wilhelm 225). I decided that something had to be done about it, but another dilemma arose – what was the learning to be? Should I embark on educating myself as a teacher? Or should I pursue a path more aligned to my core interest: that of story, and creative writing where I expected it to be found? In the end, I enrolled in an undergraduate course in English and Creative Arts, graduating in 2012 with a BA, twice winning the vice chancellor's commendation for excellence in the process.

I took to my studies with considerable relish but found, somewhat to my dismay, that creative writing as it was taught in the university was a far cry from the story craft I had been teaching as creative writing in schools. Creative writing in the undergraduate program was essentially exercise-based learning in which writing is performed so that it can be evaluated in peer-group workshops. Singling out the creative writing studies, my journey included units entitled: *Creative Writing Text and Practice, Contemporary Creative Writing: Image and Scene, Writing for the Stage,* and two self-devised independent study contracts, *Advanced Screenwriting* and *Editing Practice*. I decided recently that it wouldn't hurt to review the

content of these courses and my journal commentaries, and discovered, to my great shame, how I could have paid more attention. Scattered within these study units was a good balance of theory around general practice and a wide variety of readings to exemplify the topic in practice to which, according to my journal notes, I responded consistently and adequately. Assessment was given on written pieces in prose story form, poetry, stage script, screenplay and editorial responses, but other than my self-devised unit of *Advanced Screenwriting*, there was no discussion on what a story was, or how we develop and manage ideas as creative acts. It seems students were somehow expected to know these things. Nor could I find evidence of pedagogy around how one should read example pieces as a writer and not in literary or critical terms, as our usual practice of reader. Regardless of the study unit, it occurs to me that these issues are central to the learning and understanding of the subject, and therefore important to the pedagogy. It also occurred to me that the peer-review workshop model in these units was generally unhelpful, if not dangerous to transformational growth: they lacked the kind of discipline Frey's workshop used to distance the author and add instructional authority; and, in most instances, the writing was too premature for useful critical review and the peer group (and tutors in some cases) insufficiently experienced as writers to make instructive contributions.

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